HOSTAGE

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In memory of
Lianne, Noiya, and Yahel,
and of my brother Yossi

In my heart forevermore

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HOSTAGE

1

Five terrorists enter with weapons drawn. We are in our pajamas; they come with uniforms, balaclavas, and Kalashnikovs.They've found us: me; my wife, Lianne; our beautiful daughters, Noiya and Yahel; and our dog. We're in our safe room, a reinforced shelter in our house that is supposed to protect us from rocket attacks—not intruders like these. The dog barks in distress. She doesn't like strangers. The sound draws the terrorists' fire, and the sound of their gunshots ricochets off the walls. It's deafening. Lianne and I jump onto the girls to shield them, checking they're not hurt and shouting at the terrorists to stop. Begging them. *Don't be afraid*, they reply in Arabic, and demand that we hand over our cell phones.

I look into my daughters' eyes. Noiya is sixteen years old. Yahel is just thirteen. I try to reassure them, telling them everything will be OK. They don't scream. They don't cry. They don't even speak. They are frozen in terror.

I will never forget that look of terror in their eyes.

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I know that everyone talks about it starting at 06:29.

I don't remember 06:29.

I remember my wife's cell phone beeping like crazy and waking us all up on Shabbat morning. It's the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah. October 7, 2023.

Lianne installed an app that blares whenever there's a missile alert in our area. I never liked it. It freaks everyone out at home. But Lianne insisted. And today, that's what wakes us up. Lianne leaps out of bed to wake Noiya, sleeping on the top floor, and I wake Yahel, asleep in her ground-floor bedroom, like us. Lianne comforts Noiya, I calm Yahel. There are rockets from Gaza, we explain. They know the drill. We rush to Yahel's bedroom, which doubles as our safe room: me, Lianne, Noiya, Yahel, and the dog. No one panics. This isn't our first rodeo. We've been here so many times before. Our home in Kibbutz Be'eri is less than three miles from Gaza. Even when the rockets don't actually land inside the kibbutz, we always see the Iron Dome interceptions overhead.

We are used to the booms.

Inside the safe room, we turn on the TV and realize: something way bigger is happening this time. The rocket sirens aren't limited to the western Negev, to the towns and villages along the border with the Gaza Strip—this is much bigger. But still, no reason to panic. As soon as the sirens pause, I sneak out of the safe room to make Lianne and the girls some tea. Just like you'd expect of someone who grew up in England, Lianne raised our daughters to adore tea. They can't start their morning without a cup of English breakfast tea. It's tradition. I head back to the safe room with a pot of tea, and we drink it as we listen to the sirens outside (they've restarted) and watch the news on TV.

And then—we see it. The television shows footage of masked gunmen in a white Toyota pickup truck, driving around the city of Sderot. That's less than ten miles away. My jaw drops. Something unprecedented is happening.

Our local emergency team starts updating us on WhatsApp. At first, they warn there's a possibility that terrorists have infiltrated the kibbutz. Then it becomes a fact: there are terrorists in the kibbutz.

Right about then, the first images start coming out of an attack near Kibbutz Reim, just a few miles away. It's being reported that a party that took place overnight, the Nova Festival, has quickly become a bloodbath as terrorists embarked on a shooting spree across an open field. We see scenes of utter chaos as terrified young men and women, covered in blood, run through wheat fields. I try to reassure Lianne and the girls. "Even if terrorists have infiltrated the kibbutz," I tell them, "there can't be more than two or three of them."

More reports flood in, and my prediction begins to look absurd. It's not just Reim, or Sderot, or Be'eri. There are also gunmen in Ofakim, on the way to Netivot, and in every kibbutz in the local area. Between us and the girls, we're in multiple WhatsApp groups, and information pours in. The emergency team warns us on WhatsApp: They ran into terrorists. There are casualties.

If there are casualties, the situation's not good.

Messages stream in. *Ping. Ping. Ping.* We're glued to our phones, each update painting a bleaker, more chilling picture. The messages in our group chats—the kibbutz, local parents, the youth group, friends—are simply unthinkable. *They shot my mom!* writes one of Yahel's classmates, a thirteen-year-old girl who lives just a few hundred yards away.

The truth comes to light: dozens of terrorists have infiltrated the kibbutz. They're going door to door, storming into houses, breaking into safe rooms. Even stealing cars. The Israeli army is nowhere to be seen.

If they're stealing cars, that means they can kidnap people into Gaza.

Gaza is right here, over the fence.

Where is the army to protect us?!

As Lianne texts her family in England, we communicate through silent glances. She holds up her phone to flash me the messages she's reading. The terrorists just broke into this guy's house. They forced their way into that woman's home. We live on a kibbutz, a small communal village. Everyone knows everyone. I know where every house is, how many people live there, who they are.

I sneak out of the safe room, lock the front door, and close everything I can: shutters, doors, windows. We hear thuds, then a creaking sound. The terrorists are trying to break in through the shutters. I close the safe room door and hold the handle shut. Like almost every household safe room in Israel, you can't lock the door from the inside. These rooms are designed to protect you from rocket attacks, not intruders. In any case, the terrorists fail to break into our house and move on, next door. I only let go of the safe room door when I'm certain they've gone. We hope that's it, that they've skipped us. From the messages streaming in, we discover that the terrorists are chucking Molotov cocktails into our neighbors' houses, setting them on fire as terrified families barricade inside. We decide that if the terrorists come back, we won't resist or put up a fight. We hope that this will protect the girls and stop the terrorists from shooting.

It's 10:45. At this time on a normal Shabbat morning, we'd be sitting down for a family meal. One week we might eat *jachnun*; other times, Lianne cooks *shakshuka*. But this isn't one of those Saturdays. We've been stuck in the safe room for over four hours.

Crash. There goes the stairwell window. With a view of the surrounding fields, it's the only window in the house without shutters. I hear one of the terrorists clambering through before heading to the front door and opening it for the others. The terrorists storm the house and very quickly reach the safe room.

The door opens. They haul us out. The living room is still full of balloons from Noiya's and Yahel's birthdays. They were both born in October, so we celebrated twice this week. The five terrorists who broke into the safe room are not alone. There are five others, plus a commander barking orders. These are skilled, careful operatives, who know what they're doing. Two of the terrorists manhandle me. I know they plan to kidnap me, there's no doubt in my mind. "British passport! British passport!" Lianne starts blurting in English, trying to signal that she and the girls are British citizens, with the documents to prove it upstairs. We've talked this through. We're sure the terrorists wouldn't dare mess around with His Majesty's subjects. My wife and two daughters should be safe.

One of the terrorists signals for me to go upstairs and bring the passports. I start climbing the stairs. The broken windowpane sparkles in the sunlight. The commander catches a glimpse of me and orders his men to bring me back. They hold me in my living room, make the girls stand in the kitchen, and order Lianne, who's still wearing shorts and a tank top, to get dressed.

Lianne goes to our room. I'm right by the doorway, held by the terrorists. I watch her, lingering by the closet, unsure what to wear or what to do next. "Lianne, don't freak out," I tell her. She stares at me. Her eyes say it all*: What the hell do you mean, don't freak out?*

I think they'll be fine, Lianne and the girls. I mean, they just told her to get dressed. And anyway, they have British passports. And after all, if the terrorists wanted to kill us, they'd have already riddled us with bullets in the safe room, finished the job in five seconds flat, and moved on to the next house.

The terrorists start dragging me out of the house. I'm barefoot. I can't see the girls anymore, because they're in the kitchen behind me and the

terrorists are holding my head forward.

"I'll come back!" I shout as the terrorists haul me outside.

I can't hear them. I don't know if they heard me.

They're dragging me out through my front door. The terrorists have pinned me between them, my head forced down. When I manage to raise my head and steal a glance, I see my beautiful kibbutz reduced to carnage. Our neighbors' homes are burning. The Or family's house is in flames. So is the Levs'. And the Zohars'. These are our friends … Yonat Or and Or Lev were in my class at school.

The whole area is teeming with armed terrorists. They're laughing, strutting around, even riding our neighbors' bicycles. One of the terrorists holding me realizes I've looked up, flips out, and strikes me, sending my reading glasses, which were perched on my head, flying. The gunmen drag me toward the kibbutz's perimeter fence, a few dozen feet from our home. We live in a relatively new neighborhood of the kibbutz, called Kerem. It's in the northwestern part of the community—on the side that faces the Gaza Strip.

We pass the fence. The terrorists drag me north. As we walk, other passing terrorists take turns punching me. One of them kicks me in the ribs. The men holding me try to stop others from coming close. *They want me alive*, I think to myself. At one point, they grab a headband off a nearby terrorist to cover my eyes. I can just about see through it.

I'm being kidnapped. I understand this is a catastrophe. I understand what this means. I don't mind that they're beating me. I don't even feel it. Because in these moments, as I'm being led past the kibbutz fence, under the blazing sun, engulfed by the smell of smoldering ruins, a headband strapped over my eyes, dragged by terrorists gripping both my hands, totally aware that I am being abducted into Gaza but knowing at least that Lianne and the girls were left behind, I focus and concentrate on one mission: surviving to return home.

There is no more regular Eli. From now on, I am Eli the survivor.

The fence at the northwestern edge of the kibbutz is wide open. Standing there is a man who looks like a taxi dispatcher, directing the traffic. Unlike the others, he hasn't covered his face. He has a role. He is no mere terrorist; he's an administrator. There is order here, a plan. Logic in this murderous madness.

I understand what's happening. The terrorists are loading hostages into vehicles stolen from the kibbutz and are driving them into the Gaza Strip. We arrive at some sort of assembly point. Two terrorists shove me into a car. I recognize it; it's from the kibbutz. They pin me down to the floor in the back and we drive. They don't know I understand Arabic. I follow every word. I listen. They are euphoric. Stunned this is happening. Overjoyed they exceeded expectations. Astonished they conquered Be'eri with such ease. "*Hada millian, hada millian!*" they say to one another. *They're millionaires, these Jews!*

They throw a blanket over me, on the floor of the car. I'm boiling. I'm sweating. The car takes us down long winding roads. I hear the terrorists getting stressed. They're sure we're going to get hit in an air strike any second. I'm sure of it, too. After a short drive, they stop and haul another hostage into the car—a Thai worker from a neighboring kibbutz. They dump him on top of me.

The car speeds west. I can't see anything, but I hear the slow creaking of iron. We cross a gate, maybe a checkpoint. The terrorists stop for a second and speak to someone outside. The car continues driving and I know that it's over.

They're taking us inside.

Into Gaza.

2

The vehicle stops. The terrorists pull me and the Thai worker out. The sun is beating down on me. I'm sweating: it was hot in the car, I had a heavy blanket over me, and another person chucked on top of that the whole way. I'm also sweating from fear. The terrorists lead me out of the vehicle, still wrapped in the blanket. There's a huge commotion around us. I hear a noisy crowd, ecstatic, and suddenly hands start pulling me. Many hands. I'm being dragged into a sea of people who start thumping my head, screaming, trying to rip me limb from limb. They're fighting over me. Cursing and whistling all around. My heart is pounding, my mouth is dry, I can barely breathe. I'm a goner. The Hamas terrorists try to push the mob back, and after a struggle, they pull me back into their own hands, drag me, and quickly smuggle me into a building.

This is our first stop in the Gaza Strip. It's a mosque. I realize it because I can see the floor through my blindfold—which isn't too tight, at this point—and I recognize the colorful prayer rugs. Having just managed to save us from getting lynched, the terrorists slam the doors behind us.

Inside the mosque, it's quiet for a moment. I can hear my own breathing and the Thai worker sobbing next to me. The terrorists take us into a side room, where they remove our blindfolds and order us to strip. I blink, look around, and see that we're in what looks like a grand boardroom, with a long table and luxurious chairs, like I've just stumbled into a board meeting at an

American corporate office, not a mosque. In Gaza. With trembling hands, I remove my shirt and pants and strip down to my boxers in front of the terrorists' prying eyes. They start interrogating me. They talk to me in Arabic and I answer in Arabic. The fact I know Arabic makes them stressed. They're stressed, period.

"What's your name?"

"Eli Sharabi."

"Where are you from?"

"Kibbutz Be'eri."

"Are you a soldier?"

"No, not a soldier."

"Not a soldier?"

"No."

They look at each other and then at me again.

"You're a soldier," their commander declares.

"I'm not a soldier," I repeat.

"How old are you?"

"*Wahad wa-hamseen sneen*," I tell him in Arabic. *Fifty-one.*

"Fifty-one?"

"Yes, fifty-one."

"You're a soldier!"

"No, I'm not a soldier. I swear I'm not a soldier," I say.

"You're younger!" they accuse.

"No, no," I respond. "I swear, I'm fifty-one!"

I can see they don't believe me. They don't believe I'm not connected to the army, and they don't believe my age. They think I'm younger, and my Arabic makes them suspicious. They interrogate the Thai worker too. He doesn't understand what they want. He doesn't speak Arabic, or Hebrew, or

even any English. They hit him when he fails to answer, and he cries. I step in to help him. His name is Khun, and I try to reassure him, translate their questions, and explain what's happening. I know I have to support him and keep him safe.

After a few minutes, they blindfold us again, this time tightly, and bind our hands behind our backs with tight zip ties. From this point on, they begin what seems like an attempt to confuse the enemy. They move us from place to place, from one group of captors to the next. From the mosque, they take us to a car, where a different cell is waiting to transport us to another building: maybe a house, maybe a store, maybe another mosque. Who knows. A few minutes later, they move us again: another car, another group, another ride to the next building. In total, they move us through four different locations. From the terrorists' chatter, I understand it's deliberate and coordinated. They're switching teams, locations, and vehicles on purpose so the IDF can't track them. After the last stop, we drive again, a short ride, until the car reverses down a small slope and brakes. They pull us out. I feel sand under my bare feet and think: *Just not a tunnel, please, God, not a tunnel.* Not the nightmare of being buried underground. Not being suffocated inside Hamas's terrifying warren of tunnels, a bottomless underworld with no light, no air, and no return.

They drag us until we feel concrete beneath our feet, and we begin walking upstairs. With every step, I feel relief. All I want is to be aboveground, not below it. All I want is not to be thrown into a pit. We climb one flight of stairs, then another. Between the flights, I reckon we've entered an enclosed building. I can smell cooking and laundry. *This must be a house.* It feels reassuring to be inside. At the top of the second staircase, I feel a breeze, as if there are no walls around us. The terrorists lead us into a room and seat us on a bed. Someone brings us water. I take a few sips. They remove our zip ties,

and I thank them, relieved to free my arms. The zip ties hurt terribly and I'm glad they're off. But a minute later, the terrorists return with thick ropes and tie us up again, even tighter. They bind our hands behind our backs again, and this time also tie our legs. The ropes are so tight, they brand my flesh. The tension in my shoulders from having my arms pulled behind my back … it's pure torture.

From now on, for three days, my entire body convulses with pain. All I can think about is my *hands, shoulders, legs!* And again: *Hands. Shoulders. Legs.* God almighty! *Hands! Shoulders! Legs!* We hadn't traveled far from Be'eri to the Gaza Strip, or between stops, so I know I'm not too far. Not far from home, not far inside Gaza. In the first two hours after being kidnapped, as they move us around, before reaching this house, I'm consumed by fear, by pure survival. My body and mind haven't processed what's happening yet. But once it starts to sink in, and the adrenaline wears off, the pain—the real, physical pain—takes over. All I want, all I need, all I *crave* is to bring my arms forward. It's killing me to have my shoulders stretched backward like this.

The terrorists who brought us here leave. An older man, who must be the father of the house, keeps watch over us. Through my blindfold, which keeps slipping a little, I make out a tall, broad, strong man with white hair. He brings us food once or twice a day, placing slices of pita in our mouths. I beg him in Arabic to loosen the ropes or at least tie my hands in front of me. He refuses.

"Go to sleep," he keeps repeating.

"I can't sleep like this," I tell him. He still won't budge.

My eyes begin to adjust to the room they've put us in. It's an ordinary children's bedroom. There's a small bed, two mattresses on the floor for us, a dresser, and a desk with shelves. There are two large windows: one facing south, the other west. The windows are draped with burlap, branded with the letters: UNRWA. The fabric is secured to the windows but doesn't block the

light. I think about Lianne and the girls. About Yahel's bedroom. The gunshots inside. The room we were all snatched from. I think about Noiya and Yahel's birthday balloons. I keep closing my eyes and seeing Lianne standing frozen in front of the wardrobe, terrified, unsure what to do. *Don't freak out*, I told her.

Don't freak out about what? About what?

In the late afternoon of the first day, after several hours of lying in silence, forsaken on the mattresses—Israel's air strikes begin. I lie there, trying different positions to ease the pain in my shoulders. They hurt so much that I don't even care about the rope burns or the deafening bombings. I am consumed by the pain in my shoulders. The air strikes have begun and don't stop for a moment. That's not surprising. It's been clear since the morning that something unheard-of is going on. The IDF was nowhere to be seen. There was so much I didn't know. But I did know that the mighty Israeli army would wake up eventually, and I knew that when it did, it would look just like this: air strikes.

Between the bombings, I hear the constant buzz of a drone. That sound never stops either. I quickly realize that the Israeli air strikes are not the only terrifying sound. So are *their* rockets. Hamas's rockets. I can hear them being fired right next to us, and it dawns on me that the launchers must be nearby—maybe inside the houses, maybe in the yard. We hear the rockets as they are being fired. When the sound is faint, I know they're short-range—those that fall back at home, in the communities along the Gaza border. But when the noise is loud, I know they're long-range rockets—and I worry for everyone they're headed toward. I know exactly what it feels like on the other side.

Whenever we need to pee, the father or one of his sons grabs us, takes us out of the room, leads us to the bathroom, and pulls our boxers down so we can relieve ourselves. It's humiliating. You're standing there, exposed, blindfolded, hands tied, legs bound, performing the most basic, private act

after someone has stripped you down, knowing his gaze is fixed on you the whole time.

I can't sleep that first night. Outside, the *muezzin*'s call curls through the air. There are unfamiliar sounds: dogs barking, muffled voices of the family downstairs, and air strikes near and far. For three days, I can barely fall asleep. Now and then I slip into something I can't quite name: A fainting spell? A snooze? Maybe something else. It's unbearably hot, and when I lie on my side, the blindfold slips over my nose and mouth and I feel like I'm suffocating. I call out to my captors in panic. The father comes up to adjust the blindfold; sometimes he sends someone who looks like a younger him. Next to me, Khun never stops crying, and I try to calm him down. I'm playacting for his sake. When he calms, I feel myself again.

My heart is pounding. My heart is aching with worry. With homesickness. With fear. And my body? My body is screaming: *Help!*

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After three days in captivity, two men enter our room. They remove our blindfolds and untie the ropes. I breathe a sigh of relief and feel my shoulders breathing with me. They are both armed with Kalashnikov rifles. They eye us up, and I eye them up back. They look young, around thirty. One is shorter, a bit stocky, calm. The other, with a prominent scar across his face, is taller and more sullen. The stocky one is called Sa'id; the sullen one is Sa'ad. Later, in the tunnels, we call Sa'id "the Mask," and the sullen one "the Cleaner." But for now, we're not in the tunnels: we're in a family home. The Cleaner and the Mask dress my wounds, from the tight ropes, and then chain both Khun and me with iron shackles on our legs. They leave our hands free. And no more blindfolds.

When they see me without a shirt, they ask about a big bruise on my arm. I don't know what caused it. I guess it's from my abduction, when the terrorists gripped me. I notice that the Mask and the Cleaner are uneasy. From what I overhear, then and later, I understand they're afraid of Israeli military ingenuity. They think maybe the IDF planted a chip or some tracker in me to monitor them. Like the terrorists who interrogated me at the mosque, they are surprised by my Arabic and struggle to fathom I'm not from Shin Bet or Mossad.

Slowly, I start to study them. Bit by bit, I learn everything. With the keen senses of a man focused on survival, I smell, I watch, I feel. At first, the Cleaner, the Mask, the father, and the sons speak in short, terse, detached, suspicious sentences. As the days go by, they talk more, I listen more, they listen more, and I talk more.

And I learn. The Cleaner, for example, is the more religious and radical of the pair. He fasts every Monday and Thursday. He prays devoutly. His hand gestures are impatient, and he keeps repeating that there is no place for Jews in this land and that the hostages will only be freed if all the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails are released. Some years ago, I learn, he was severely injured in an Israeli air strike, leaving him with a scar—and rage. The Mask, meanwhile, is more relaxed, with a bashful smile, and he likes sweet drinks. When the father goes out to the store, he asks him to bring back a Coke or Sprite. I learn that they have families, wives, children. They try to keep these personal details under wraps, but as time goes by, their tongues loosen. And I study them.

They leave their weapons outside our room. I hear them cleaning them at night. They tell me not to worry, not to be afraid—they're protecting us. I study their routine, and I study ours, mine and Khun's. The Cleaner and the Mask pray five times a day. They invite me to join them in prayer. I politely decline. On one occasion, they manage to persuade Khun, and he prostrates

himself just like them, repeating what they say and murmuring along with them.

The Mask is a talker. He asks me so many questions. The same ones over and over again, like he's trying to trip me up, to see if I'll answer differently the second or third time. As if I'm a Mossad spy and it's his job to expose me. I speak with him in a way that sounds free, but I'm not free at all. I'm always weighing every word, with both him and the others. I'm careful not to mention my military background in intelligence, or to allude to my work with major Israeli defense firms, or to bring up politics. I agree with him when I have to, nodding when he accuses the IDF of bombing hospitals or killing babies. *That's terrible*, I say. *War is terrible.*

And the Mask *really* likes to talk. He gives me mini-lectures about how he sees the world. How they see the world. This land is theirs. All of it. I should go back to Morocco or Yemen, where my grandparents came from. This land isn't mine. There will be no peace as long as we, the Jews, are on their land.

I begin learning about the family holding us in their home. At first, they hide their names and tell me to call everyone "Abu Ahmed." But every day at 04:00, I wake from my light sleep and hear the father waking his sons for prayer, calling them by name. Sometimes their friends come into the yard and shout their names from outside. That's how I learn that the boys are called Ahmed, the eldest; Mosab, the middle son; and Yusuf, the youngest.

Ahmed is number two in the household. He's eager to prove he's a real man, that he's capable, that he's strong. Whenever there's a nearby air strike and we hear a building collapsing, he runs out to help and assist in the rescue. Mosab, the middle one, keeps a greater distance. I struggle to work out much about him. Yusuf, the youngest, is the closest. The first time Yusuf speaks to me, when he comes upstairs with food, he asks me, "How old do I look to you?"

I look at him for a moment. "Fifteen or sixteen?" He's big and well-built, but his face betrays his youth. Yusuf smiles but doesn't reveal his age.

I learn about the father. He's a strong man, wise and religious. He calls the shots in this house. Indoors he wears a traditional *jalabiya*, but outside he dresses like a modern man: jeans, a button-down shirt, a clean-shaven face. When he first talks to me, he tells me that he used to work in construction in Tel Aviv and still remembers a little Hebrew. His English is excellent. His sons also speak English, which suggests this is an educated family who care deeply about academic studies. The father pushes the boys to succeed. They're not poor. There is plenty of food in the house, good clothes, good shoes. The father always carries wads of cash in his shirt pocket. I never see the mother. I only hear her whispering to my captors, the Mask and the Cleaner, in the stairwell. But I eat the food she cooks and wear the clothes she washes.

Khun is really struggling. There are times he cries a lot, bangs his head against the wall, loses control. Unlike me, he can't get his head around the situation. The language gap, the cultural divide—everything is much harder for him. I try to protect him, as much as I can, to cheer him up. From the start, I understand I have a role with Khun, and I embrace it: to mediate the situation for him, to give him strength. When there are air strikes, I gesture to tell him it's OK, that it's not aimed at us. When Hamas launches rockets from nearby, I motion to explain what they mean and why he's not at risk. On hard days and long nights, I try, with broken words in two languages and pantomime gestures, to spark hope in him, to remind him that this is temporary, that it will pass. Khun's condition worries the Cleaner, the Mask, and the father as well.

After a few days, they bring us some toiletries. I'm sure we smelled disgusting already, from the journey, the sweat, the sleeping under heavy blankets, the constant fear, and the nightmares. They bring us a bucket of cold water and soap, take us from our room to a corner of the same floor, and ask

us to strip and wash. Then they demand we shave all our body hair: not just head and beard, but also pubic hair. I stand naked in front of the Mask, the Cleaner, and the father, and shave my bare body with a razor. Outside, I hear the sounds of the city: passing cars, the rumble of distant air strikes, children playing in a nearby yard, women talking. And there I am, stark naked, standing in front of three pairs of prying eyes. My private parts exposed. Ordered to remove every hair from my body. My hand trembles as I hold the razor. I peel myself in front of them. I empty myself before them. I humiliate myself under their gaze.

On day five in captivity, a man we haven't seen before arrives. He's very tall, at least six foot three, fair-haired, fair-skinned, with blue eyes and a camera in hand. He looks German but speaks fluent Arabic with the Cleaner and the Mask. With us, he speaks flawless English. He explains that he's going to film us. That makes sense to me: I know this playbook from Ron Arad, an Israeli Air Force officer who went missing in action over Lebanon in 1986 and was photographed in captivity; and Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier abducted into Gaza in 2006, who was filmed as proof of life. This is what it means to be a hostage in terrorist captivity now. Shalit came back alive. Arad did not.

The German inspects the wounds on my arms from the rope burn, concerned. Then, together with the Mask and the Cleaner, they begin setting up for the shoot. They construct a backdrop, make sure nothing in the frame might reveal our location, and write down what we are to say. I'm instructed to state my name, where I'm from, who my parents are, and what I do for a living. I'm told to speak to the Israeli government: to stop the fighting and get me out.

They sit me down. I look into the camera and speak. I read the words they dictated, but in my mind, I'm speaking to Lianne and the girls. I imagine them watching me, looking into my eyes. I imagine my siblings watching me.

My mom. I need them all to understand: I'm alive. I'm healthy. I'm OK. After the shoot, the German tries to reassure us. Give it a few days, and there'll be a deal, a prisoner exchange, and you'll go home, he says. He packs up his equipment and leaves.

I keep studying my surroundings. The people. The house. Constantly gathering information. I work out we're on the second floor, one above the main area, where the father, his wife, and their three sons reside. This floor is unfinished; the outer walls are open. The Mask and the Cleaner hang fabric over the walls to cover them, anxious that someone outside might see us. After what happened near the mosque, I'm worried about that too. I understand that the Mask and the Cleaner and the men of the house aren't just here to stop me from escaping; they're also shielding me from anyone who might want to harm me.

The toilets are a few feet away from the room. Unlike in the first three days, we can now walk there alone, taking small steps because the iron shackles on our legs still limit our movement. There is fresh air in the bathroom. A sea breeze from the west. It's a moment to close my eyes and breathe.

Sometimes I peek through the windows, especially in the morning, before the father, the Mask, or the Cleaner enter to bring us food. I shift the cloth slightly from the window and look out. Into Gaza. I'm not sure where I am exactly. We are surrounded by houses; some are tall, multistory buildings. There are electrical wires all over the place, black solar water heaters on the rooftops, and a busy road nearby. Sometimes, when there's a drone overhead and we're alone, I stick my hands out, try to signal to it, to wave, to call for help—maybe someone will see. Maybe someone in the IDF will realize there's a hostage here.

It's no use.

I have no thoughts of escape. There are many occasions when I reckon I could grab a weapon off one of my captors, shoot them, and run. They're not elite fighters. They're not fighters at all. In my mind, I call them "reservists." Guys who are better suited to guarding hostages like me than real combat. But suppose I took a weapon, killed them, and managed to escape—*then what?* Even if I made it out of the house, how would I get off the street? And if I got off the street, how would I get out of this hostile neighborhood, where everyone would be quick to spot a stranger? And even if somehow I wriggled out of this hostile area where I'd be spotted immediately, how would I get anywhere near Israeli forces without getting shot? Without them thinking I was a terrorist?

I have no thoughts of escape.

They provide us with fresh clothes, toiletries, and food. In the first few days, we receive only pita. But after a week, a tray arrives with cooked rice and meat. The food is well seasoned and reminds me of home cooking. We eat well. As I said, this is a family of means, and you can still buy nearly anything in the Gaza Strip.

Eventually, the mutual suspicion and distance between us narrows, and I find myself growing closer to my captors and the family holding me in their house. We begin to form bonds of trust and even start to feel close. These sorts of connections are almost inevitable. This might be hard to comprehend from the outside, especially after everything that happened and the savage atrocities that they and their comrades performed in the name of their horrible organization, which they wholeheartedly support. But clichéd as it might sound, they are still human beings. And here we are, human beings coming face-to-face with other human beings. Meeting each other amid fear, anger, terror, and mutual suspicion, but also laughter, pain, depth, familiarity, and commonality.

This isn't Stockholm Syndrome. I don't identify with them. I don't pity them. I'm not confused about who they are or what they really want. And as I said, if I thought that snatching their guns and killing them would get me home, I'd do it in a heartbeat. But this is simply a natural, human dynamic that's hard to resist. It's a mix of survival instinct and a desire to stay in control and manage the situation, because the better I know and understand them, the better I can express my needs, make requests, read the room. But partly, it's just the kind of person I am. When I meet people, I always try to get to know them. I can't help it. Even when, in the situation we're in now, I see only pure evil in their eyes.

On many evenings, we sit and talk and play cards or rummy. The father turns out to be a rummy champion, and he's nearly unbeatable. I call him *hajj*, out of respect. He tells me about his grandfather who lived in Jaffa. I tell him about my grandmother, who also lived in Jaffa, on Yefet Street. We talk about the Jaffa seashore, the smell of fish, the streets, the famous Abu Hassan hummus place that we work out we've both eaten at. One time, when he brings us food with hummus on the tray, he jokes, "Better than Abu Hassan, right?"

My conversations with the Mask and the Cleaner also deepen, but especially with the Mask. There is something very innocent, almost childlike, about them. Sometimes I feel like I am talking to people who are living twenty years in the past. One day, they both tell me excitedly about a movie they just watched, gushing about how amazing and special it was.

"What's it called?" I ask.

"*Titanic*!"

"*Titanic*? With Leonardo DiCaprio?"

I stare at them. Titanic*?* I think. *What year are you living in?*

The Mask tells me he likes to dance with his wife, but because of Hamas's religious regime, they can't. I ask him if he wants to live differently; whether he dreams of quiet, of a life where he could just go to the beach with his kids and enjoy a normal day. He doesn't answer, but I see his eyes glimmer when I raise the possibility of a good, ordinary life without struggle. But despite that glint, there is no doubt in his mind about his leaders. I tell him about democracy, what it looks like when you can choose how you want to live.

I tell the Mask about Israeli society. Neither he nor the Cleaner knows any Israelis. They don't believe me when I say that not everyone in Israel just wants to kill them all the time. But the nonstop bombings only reinforce their thinking. "Bibi's crazy," they say. "He wants to kill us all! Why won't he stop?" They honestly believed everything would end after two weeks of air strikes. They didn't understand, it's different this time. For what it's worth, I don't think they're representative of all Hamas operatives. I think they're especially shortsighted, naive about what's really happening, and massively ignorant.

They get their information from Al Jazeera, from Israeli television, and especially from Abu Obaida: the spokesman of Hamas's military wing. Abu Obaida is like a god to them. A king. The font of all knowledge. Their preacher. No less than Sinwar or Haniyeh themselves. They absolutely idolize him. Whenever he goes on air, they stand to attention, glued to the television or radio, hypnotized, imbibing his words without a shred of doubt. When the Mask and the Cleaner first tell me about him, they can't believe I don't know who he is. I tell them I've heard of Sinwar, I've heard of Haniyeh … but Abu Obaida? Nope, never. "Impossible," they insist. "There's no way you don't know who Abu Obaida is."

Many of my conversations with the Mask, the Cleaner, the father, and the sons revolve around money. They want to know how much a house costs in

Israel. How much one costs in Be'eri. What salaries are like. From what they saw on October 7, they're sure we are all millionaires. I talk them through the convoluted process of building a house in Israel, and they laugh. "It doesn't work like that here," they say with a smile. "No *teken* here," they joke, throwing out the Hebrew for "building code."

They worry a lot about money. It's a major problem here in Gaza. They all went to college, but none of them work in their field of study. There are no jobs. The Cleaner tells me he studied electrical engineering. One night, I sit with him to go over some materials. Another night, I sit beside both of them and teach them some basic economic concepts, sketching out a decision tree.

When they realize I used to teach at a university at one point, they are awestruck. They practically worship teachers. They speak about me with one another and with the family with admiration: *"Mu'allim, mu'allim!" Teacher, teacher! He's a teacher!* Their treatment of me, already courteous, becomes even more respectful.

The days are long. I am often left alone with my thoughts. I stare around the room. At the sealed windows. I can't talk with Khun much, certainly not at length. He doesn't understand me; I don't understand him. So we spend many hours in silence together. I listen to the chaotic noise outside, terrified by the encroaching air strikes, startled by the sound of missiles being launched nearby, sparking cheers of jubilation in the neighborhood. The endless stretches of time give me room to think, to yearn. I keep thinking about Lianne and the girls. I imagine our sweet moments together: Shabbat and holiday meals, trips, family celebrations. The long hours leave me plenty of time to imagine every detail.

I think a lot about coming home. I fantasize about it. I imagine telling Lianne, *That's it, let's get out of here. Come on, Lianne, let's take our girls to live somewhere different, somewhere quiet.* But I refuse to let myself sink into longing. I

refuse to let myself drown in pain. I am surviving. I am a hostage. In the heart of Gaza. A stranger in a strange land. In the home of a Hamas-supporting family. *And I'm getting out of here.* I have to.

I'm getting out of here.

I'm coming home.

3

October 31, 2023.

Nighttime.

Khun and I jolt awake from a horrifying blast. The most terrifying one I've ever heard. I've been close to many explosions by now, but never anything so powerful. The shock wave sends the fabric over the windows flying instantly, and the door breaks apart in one go. Nearby, we hear a tall building collapse. A thick cloud of dust gushes into the house, enveloping everything. We cough, scramble up, and hobble outside, our legs still shackled. We leave the room and rush toward the stairs, fearing this house might also collapse.

All around, we hear screams: women, men, children. I see the Mask in the stairwell. He's stunned, his expression blank. "Sa'id," I shout, "the house is about to collapse!" It takes him another second to collect himself, and then he quickly unlocks our chains so we can run downstairs. We descend one flight, to the family's living quarters, and then another, to the basement. The soles of my feet touch sand, the same sand I stepped on when I first arrived here nearly a month ago.

Sa'id directs us to take shelter under the staircase. "Did anyone see you?" he keeps asking. "When you left the room, did you notice if anyone saw you from the neighboring houses?" Because all the covers they had hung around

the house were blown away by the blast, he's worried we might have been exposed.

While we're still downstairs, we hear another bomb hit the building next door. The Mask and the Cleaner, who has just arrived, tell us, *that's it*, we're not going back upstairs. It's safer down here, and this is where we'll stay. I smirk bitterly to myself. *Safer down here?* Even if a missile hits us, I'd rather be upstairs and die quickly than be buried alive under rubble, never to be found.

Once things calm down outside, we begin clearing the storage piled under the staircase. The family keeps a lot of stuff there. Once we clear everything, we drag the mattresses into our new corner. They shackle our legs again, and I realize: We've moved downstairs for good. We live here now.

The Mask and the Cleaner claim that three hundred people were killed in the blast that brought down the building next door. I don't believe them. I know they always exaggerate.

They still take us upstairs to use the bathroom. On the way, we pass the family's quarters on the first floor. We never enter. The door in the stairwell is almost always shut. One time, I find it open and hear the television. Suddenly, I hear a mother and a child, Israeli hostages, speaking in Hebrew, pleading with the Israeli government to get them out. I sit down, panting. I can't believe it. My eyes well up, and I cry. It's the first time I've cried since the day I was kidnapped.

Suddenly, I realize two things:

Women and children were also kidnapped on October 7.

And that means there's a chance my wife and daughters are hostages too.

It's already clear that Hamas stole many hostages into Gaza. I'm imagining thousands. But women and children? I hadn't even considered that possibility. The realization hits me like a punch to the gut. I sit on the mattress and cry in front of Khun, who doesn't understand what's happening to me. I

think about Lianne and the girls. Maybe they're also grappling with the same fear, the same air strikes that come out of nowhere, the same loneliness and dread. My heart aches to imagine them as hostages. My heart aches to think of kidnapped children. I close my eyes and lie back on the mattress, sobbing. *Maybe they're hostages too.* Lianne. And the girls.

Later, I ask the Mask and the Cleaner. "Why were women and children kidnapped?"

"It was a mistake."

A mistake? It wasn't one woman. Or one child. How was that a mistake? I tell them I know Hamas terrorists shot women and children on October 7. I saw it in the kibbutz WhatsApp groups.

"Mistake, it was a mistake," they repeat. "Your wife and daughters are OK, they're definitely OK." I look at them. They believe what they're saying. I realize they don't understand everything. In fact, they don't know much. It's better that way. Good they don't know everything, good they don't understand much. I cling to what they're telling me.

I'm always hot. It was hot upstairs. It's hot down here too. I sweat. I crave air. Behind the staircase where we now spend all our time, there's a door that leads to the backyard. Sometimes the Mask takes pity on me and opens it to let in some air. I savor it. Winter is beginning. The winds are cooling. One evening, it rains. The Mask leaves the door open, and I watch the raindrops falling outside. I breathe in the scent of rain, inhaling deeply, and something in me wants to cry again. I'm flooded with memories, overwhelmed with longing, for my family, my land, the kibbutz, my home, my freedom, last year's winter. I breathe in the moist air and the sweet chill of water pattering on earth.

The Mask, the Cleaner, and the family continue to spend time with us. They come down to the basement to bring us food, to talk, to play cards. Every ten days or so, they let us shower, with a bucket and some soap. By mid-

November, they tell us there's talk of a deal. *There are talks underway*, they tell me every day. Now they've agreed on this and that; actually now they've agreed on something else. They are hoping for a *hudna*, a ceasefire. So am I.

One afternoon, just before sunset, the Cleaner quietly calls me and signals for me to follow. We climb up the stairs to the second floor, where we stayed at the beginning. He knows that I'm always hot and like fresh air, so he invites me to stand with him by the large open window, to feel the sea breeze. We both enjoy the wind blowing over us. It's a rare moment of quiet, outside and inside. We stand like friends. Like brothers. Like something that can't be defined. As if we're not captor and captive. Hostage taker and hostage. As if I'm not far away from home and my loved ones. As if we've just met by chance while traveling in a cold and distant land. As if he's not a religious extremist. As if he doesn't hate my people. As if he no longer sees me as a bitter enemy.

The Cleaner opens up to me about his family. "My home is in Khan Younis," he says. I nod. "My whole family is from there. We have land there. With olive trees. Soon the olives will ripen, and we'll harvest them and press them for oil." I nod and smile at him. He looks at me. "It's a shame not everyone in Israel is like you," he says.

"Like me?"

"Like you," he repeats. "Like you who believes in freedom. That everyone should do what's good for themselves."

I look at him. How little he knows about Israelis! How much hate he's heard about us his whole life! "Most Israelis are like me," I tell him.

He says nothing. The setting sun, orange and gold, shines on us both. Darkness falls, and I return downstairs to my flimsy mattress under the stairs. Next to a silent Khun, who doesn't speak Hebrew.

The talk of a *hudna* grows more concrete. I hear bits and pieces from the Mask and the Cleaner, from the father, from the sons. I learn that the first stage will include women and children. I'm shocked and pained to hear how many women and children are involved. The ceasefire keeps getting postponed. After I've already convinced Khun that it's about to happen, he can't understand why it hasn't come into effect yet. He thinks I just said that to give him false hope, and he breaks down again. I try to explain with gestures and broken words: *It's really happening! Just a bit longer. Just a moment more.*

One evening I tell the Mask, "Wake me up the moment the *hudna* starts."

On my forty-eighth morning in Gaza, he wakes me up. "It's started," he says. It's happening. There's silence all around. Every day, the Mask and the Cleaner update me on what happened today, how many women were released, how many children. On day fifty, they suddenly tell me: "Get ready. Take your clothes and your things, because tonight you're being moved somewhere else."

They don't say where. They don't explain why. They claim it'll be safer where I'm going. That it's no longer safe here. I ask the father too, and he says the same: "You'll be moved somewhere safe." I'm not even imagining a tunnel; I'm imagining another house. I still hope this ceasefire might bring me home.

That evening, on day fifty-one of captivity, the Mask comes to take me. I say goodbye to Khun. From what my captors tell me, he is about to be released. I ask him, when he gets back to Israel, to tell people that he was with me. To tell the IDF and whoever he can that he was with Eli Sharabi in captivity. To let my family know I'm alive, that I'm OK. I give him very clear instructions and hope he'll carry them out, that he'll tell whoever needs to know about me. I hug him, and we go up to the family's floor and enter. It's my first time in this part of the house. We cross it to exit through the front door.

The living room is dark. *Keep your head down*, the father and the Mask tell me. From the corner of my eye, I glimpse the wife sitting on the couch and little Yusuf standing and watching me. Sa'id unlocks my leg cuffs, puts a hat on my head, and orders me not to speak to anyone. No one. Even if someone addresses me, *don't respond*. I nod, and we head outside: me, the Mask, and the father.

It's a little chilly. I walk close to them, afraid. Afraid that someone on the street might recognize me, that I'll be attacked, that a frenzied mob will grab me and break me to pieces. The street is in ruins. I can see the devastation from the air strikes. There are a few people walking around. We walk a bit and turn right, then left, onto a parallel street. There, we stop near a building. I gather from them that we're waiting for their commander.

After a few minutes of standing in silence, a tall man draws near. The Mask and the father shake his hand. This is their commander, I realize. Later, in the tunnel, we'll call him "the Triangle." But for now, he's the commander. He exchanges a few words with Sa'id, and then they step aside, leaving me with the father.

I sit down on a step nearby. My leg is twitching. My breath is heavy. I lower my head onto my knees. Someone approaches, a man I don't know. I try not to look up, not to react when he says hello to me and then hello to the father. The man looks at me and asks the father, "What's wrong with him?"

The father looks at me, then at him. "He's sick."

I can barely breathe. The man wishes me health and walks away.

Sa'id returns with another man and a woman. The man smiles at me and shakes my hand. They talk. The woman, veiled, stands next to me. But when the man speaks to her, she responds in fluent Arabic, and I immediately realize: It's a man. Not a woman under those clothes. I say nothing.

After a few minutes, Sa'id and the other man, who we'll later call "Nightingale," say we're heading back home for now. The handover will happen tomorrow. I don't know why. I walk back with the father, Sa'id, Nightingale, and the man dressed as a woman. When we arrive, Sa'id lays us down on the mattresses downstairs again, next to Khun. Then he and the others leave.

I'm left with the man dressed as a woman. He takes off the women's clothing and the veil. I see a young, tall, bearded, long-haired man, with injuries all over his body. His appearance reminds me of Ron Arad. He looks at me.

"Hello," he says. "I'm Almog. Almog Sarusi. And who are you?"

I look at him for a moment, puzzled. "I'm Eli Sharabi. I didn't know if you were Israeli or not. Where are you from?"

"Ra'anana," he answers with a smile.

"Ra'anana?" That's north of Tel Aviv … "How did someone from Ra'anana get kidnapped?"

"I was at the Nova Festival," he explains.

The Nova Festival? Suddenly, I remember. There was a big music festival near Kibbutz Reim. I recall what I saw on TV on October 7, the videos of young men and women running in panic through the fields. We hug. "You look like Ron Arad," I tell him.

"Who's Ron Arad?" he asks. Too young to remember.

We sit under the staircase, on the mattresses. Khun sits beside us, silent. I look at Almog. "Finally, someone I can speak Hebrew to," I say.

Almog chuckles. "My guard asked me to teach him Hebrew at one point," he says. "He even brought a notebook. I started teaching him to write."

"Did you meet any other hostages?" I ask.

Almog shakes his head.

"Heard any news? TV? Do you know what's been going on?"

"Nothing."

I look at his wounds. "What happened? Tell me what you've been through."

Almog sighs. He runs his hand over his injuries, takes a breath, and begins. "I was with my girlfriend at the Nova party near Reim. It was an amazing nature party, I'm telling you, nothing like it. A huge stage, music, drink and food stands, thousands of young people. We were dancing, drinking, smoking. Man, it was beautiful. Until the sun began to rise, and rockets rose in the sky with it."

Almog pauses, looks at us, and continues: "We didn't understand the scale of what was happening, but we knew we had to get out. I got in the car with my girlfriend and another couple of friends. We started driving. There were already rumors about terrorists shooting. We kept driving fast until a Hamas squad standing in the middle of the road sprayed the car with bullets. The driver was hit, and the car flipped over. I screamed Shema Yisrael," he adds, referring to the prayer Jews traditionally recite before death. "I thought that was it. Then I looked around. I saw the couple was dead, and my girlfriend was bleeding. I tried to stop the bleeding with a tourniquet. It was no use."

Almog closes his eyes and continues softly. "It didn't help at all. The terrorists got closer, and I realized there was nothing I could do. I just shouted to them in Arabic, 'Don't shoot!' I got out of the car with my hands up. That's it. They took me to Gaza. Only on the way there did I realize I was wounded, that I was bleeding."

I sit in silence, staring at Almog.

"Where did they take you?" I ask.

Almog sighs. "They put me in some house, tied me to a bed with these injuries, leaving me bleeding for ten days. Barely any food, barely any water, couldn't move my arms or my body, no treatment. I think I survived those first days only because I was still high from the party. I was gonna die there, until one day some tall guy showed up. Blond, kinda German-looking."

"The cameraman!" I say.

He shrugs. "The cameraman?"

"That German guy filmed me for a video!"

"Where?" he asks.

"Here. In this house."

"You were in this house the whole time?"

"Yes, Khun and I were here the entire time."

"How did they treat you?" Almog asks.

"Most of the time … well," I say. "We ate OK, they treated us OK. They took care of us. What about you?"

"The first days were hell," Almog says. "But after that German doctor came and was shocked by my condition, they moved me to a different house. That guard who's now here with us, he took care of me. He had to feed me with a spoon at first, I was that bad." Almog falls silent. So do I. A cool breeze slips through the basement door. "So where are you from?" he asks. "What happened to you?"

"Kibbutz Be'eri," I say, "that's where I live. Where I was taken from."

"How old are you?" Almog asks.

"Fifty-one."

"You have family?" he asks.

"Yes." I pause. "My wife, Lianne, and my daughters, Noiya and Yahel. And my brother Yossi and his wife and kids, they also live in Be'eri."

"What happened to them?" Almog asks quietly.

"I don't know," I say with a sign. "Lianne is a British citizen, so she and the girls have British passports. I hope that helped them. There wasn't chaos in the house when I left. No gunfire. I believe they're OK, that they're waiting for me."

The Mask and the other guard shout at us to be quiet. We shut up for a second, then keep talking. More and more Hebrew whispering under the staircase. Almog tells me he's studying civil engineering in college but dreams of working in music. He tells me about his parents, his family, his friends. I tell him about my job, about management, about my extended family. I get to know a smart and special young man.

The next day, the Mask gives Almog a haircut and a shave. From beneath his disheveled appearance, the young man he truly is begins to emerge.

In the evening, we pack our belongings, say goodbye to the father of the house, cross the living room in darkness, and step out into the street. Almog walks ahead with Nightingale. I walk with the Cleaner. We proceed for several minutes in silence until we reach a mosque. There, waiting for us, is their commander: the Triangle. This is not a good sign, I realize. Why a mosque? Why not another house? Why are we going into a mosque?

Inside, the Cleaner and Nightingale take us to a side room and open a trapdoor. Beneath the trapdoor is a shaft. A shaft leading into a dark tunnel.

I tremble. I clutch myself and shake my head: *No. No, no. Not a tunnel.* I look at Almog, who looks back at me. *Please, just not a tunnel.* From inside the shaft, climbing the ladder, comes another guard, someone new. He smiles and signals for us to descend.

I look at the Cleaner. "I'm not going down."

"It's for your own good," the Cleaner replies.

"I'm not going."

"You're going down!"

"I'm not."

The Cleaner gives me a threatening stare. "Go down, right now," he growls. I look at him. I have a choice. To go into the tunnel … or die. There is always a choice. Always a choice. There. Is. Always. A. Choice. I can choose to end my life here and now. Resist until the Cleaner shoots me and I fall bleeding on the mosque floor. I can choose that. Just like I could have chosen to resist in my bomb shelter at home until they shot and killed me. Some made that choice. It is a choice. Even when you have no control over yourself, you always have a choice. I look at the Cleaner, and I choose: *I'm going down.*

I start descending the ladder. The shaft is very narrow.

After me, the Cleaner climbs down. Then Almog. Then Nightingale.

Above us, the shaft is sealed.

Below us, darkness opens.

4

We climb down a long ladder, into the shaft. I'm scared. Every nightmare, every fear, every fevered thought climbs down with me, step by step, down the ladder.

I brace myself for total darkness, for the Hamas tunnels I've seen on TV, the ones we've all heard about. And now it's me—*me!*—going down into them. Any moment now, the trapdoor will shut above me, and I'll be buried here.

The anxiety is all-consuming. After two tense minutes of carefully climbing down, we reach the bottom, about one hundred feet underground. It's pitch black. The terrorists have only headlamps to light the way. We walk a few steps, then descend a flight of stairs. A few more steps—another staircase. After the stairs, we keep moving forward, and I feel the ground sloping downward. We're going even deeper underground.

We spend several stressful, silent minutes walking through a dark corridor with arched concrete walls. Then, at last, a faint white glow appears ahead. It's a fluorescent light, growing brighter as we approach. The corridor begins to widen, and we enter a space that's clearly been adapted for living. There's lighting. A real floor. Ceramic tiles on the walls. A sink. A kitchen. A bathroom.

They order us to sit on a mattress in the middle of this large room.

It's hot. Very hot. I assume it's from the stress and fear. I take off my shirt, but I'm still hot. I take off my pants too and sit in my boxers. Almog sits beside me. We wait. I look around. The room we're in is long and narrow. At one end there's a large TV mounted on the wall; at the other end, where we came from, is a wide opening that leads to the corridor. The corridor has other doors, to the kitchen and a bathroom. There is another narrow corridor extending from the room, seemingly leading to another space. The terrorist we call "the Triangle" and the one who greeted us at the ladder, who we later call "Smiley," bring us water to drink and some wafers to eat. I don't feel like eating. I just keep drinking. I'm still boiling. I can't believe I'm going to stay here. That I'm going to spend tonight here, and who knows how many more nights after that.

I can barely breathe.

We hear more people approaching. In the tunnels, we quickly learn, every sound carries, clear and sharp, from one end to the other. The sealed acoustics amplify everything. Almog hears it before me, because my hearing has been a bit weak for years, and I guess the explosions have made it weaker still. Almog hears the creak of the trapdoor opening, hushed whispers, approaching footsteps. I hear them too. Two young men are brought into the room and placed on the mattress across from us. We study them in silence. One is missing an arm. They glance around, disoriented. I wonder: *Are they hostages too? Are they Israeli?*

After the captors leave again, one of them turns to us. "You're Israelis, right?" he asks. We nod.

"I'm Ori, and this is Hersh," he says, pointing at the young man who is missing an arm. "Who are you?"

"I'm Almog."

"I'm Eli," I say. "Where are you from?"

"We were at the Nova Festival," says Ori.

"So was I," says Almog.

They look at me. "I'm from Kibbutz Be'eri," I say.

The four of us fall silent for a moment.

"What happened to you?" I ask Hersh.

"I was injured in the rocket shelter," he says quietly.

"What rocket shelter?" I ask.

"The one near Kibbutz Reim," he replies. The roads in Israel's south are dotted with concrete bunkers, to protect from the regular mortar and rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip. "After the rockets started at the party, we drove away, then stopped and went into the shelter. We thought it would protect us."

I study Hersh's delicate, thoughtful face. It's hard to look at his missing arm, harder still to hear what these young men have endured. Ori, Almog, and Hersh keep talking about the party, trying to piece together how, when, and from where each of them was kidnapped. I gather that Ori and Hersh are both from Jerusalem. Ori tells Almog that he met Hersh in a hospital in Gaza, where they were both treated for their injuries.

We fall silent again, hearing more approaching footsteps and voices. The captors bring in three more young men: two dark-haired, one fair. They also sit down. Hostages. The seven of us start getting to know one another. The fair-haired one is called Alon. The slim, dark-haired one, Or, is breathing heavily. I can tell he's anxious. The shorter one is Elia. All three were kidnapped from the Nova Festival. It turns out they were in the same rocket shelter as Hersh. They recognize him and look at him in surprise.

"We thought you were dead!" they tell him.

"Not dead," Hersh replies with a shy smile. "Injured, but alive."

The last time they saw him, he was bleeding under a blanket in the back of the terrorists' pickup truck. They never imagined he'd survived all of that.

We start talking. It's a kind of emotional release, telling stories, sharing experiences, opening up. Or, Elia, and Alon are just relieved to speak out loud after days of being forced to whisper. I look around at everyone's faces. I'm struggling to be fully present, still horrified by the fact that I'm in this tunnel. But I see the fear in their eyes too, and how tightly they all cling to this conversation. Slowly, it begins to soothe all seven of us—including me.

One of the captors—the one who brought Or, Alon, and Elia—enters and speaks to us. He's a dark-skinned, stocky man. Elia, Or, and Alon call him "the Circle," and from now on, so do we. He explains, in a mix of Arabic and Hebrew, that he's in charge of the tunnel and will take care of our needs. Then he tells us to take our mattresses and move even deeper into the tunnel. We carry them and cram into a narrow room wedged between two larger ones: one for us, one for them. Ours is much smaller. No TV, nothing really. Just lights, a floor, and walls. We place our seven mattresses in a row on the floor. Besides the connecting corridor, our room also opens out to the main hallway, which leads to the bathroom.

We hear the terrorists settling into their own room. There are the Mask and the Cleaner, who came with me; Nightingale, who came with Almog; Smiley, who was already waiting for us in the tunnel; their commander, the Triangle; and the Circle, who came with Hersh and Ori and seems to be the tunnel's logistics officer, the man responsible for order, food, and supplies. Our captors are relatively calm. The ongoing ceasefire outside has affected their mood. They feed us, and after the meal, the shackles come back out.

I'm not rattled by the chains. I was already shackled the whole time in the house. But for Alon, Or, and Elia, it's a new and terrifying experience. Our captors have only five pairs of leg cuffs for the seven of us. They skip Hersh. I guess they realize with only one arm, he's not going far anyway. They chain Alon, Elia, Ori, and Or, and then try to chain me and Almog together, one leg

cuff each. We refuse. We protest, we plead, we tell them: "No way!" Now that there are seven us, we suddenly have the power for small acts of resistance. "Almog's injured too," I plead, "just put it on me." Nightingale has been with Almog the whole time and is emotionally attached to him. I can tell. I keep begging him, until eventually he relents and convinces the others. I get the leg cuffs for myself.

Our captors want us to fall asleep already. To shut up. But we keep talking, getting to know each other, trying to understand what happened, how, and to whom. The young men talk about the party and the shelter that Alon, Or, Elia, and Hersh were snatched from. One name keeps coming up: Aner Shapira.

They describe how dozens of young people huddled in fear inside a crowded, enclosed rocket shelter near Kibbutz Reim. How the terrorists arrived, shouting in Arabic, and started throwing grenades inside. How one young man who panicked and ran outside was shot on the spot. And how there was a young man named Aner Shapira, who stood at the entrance, took command, ordered everyone to lie down, caught the grenades as they flew in, and chucked them back out. Over and over again. Seven times. He told them that if anything happened to him, someone else had to keep going. Hersh tells us that Aner was his childhood friend from Jerusalem. They came to the party together.

"What happened to him in the end, to Aner?" I ask.

They go quiet for a moment. "In the end, there was an explosion that killed him and injured Hersh." They don't know if it was a grenade, an IED, or an RPG that killed their guardian angel—whatever it was, it was over. The terrorists stormed the shelter, dragged Elia, Alon, Hersh, and Or outside, and emptied their magazines inside. Elia's and Or's partners were still inside. They don't know what happened to them.

I'm struggling to take this all in. Really struggling. It feels like a trauma processing workshop. They keep going over the atrocities again and again: the blood in the shelter, the terror, the bodies, the gunfire. The screams.

After all the stories—comparing the houses where we've been held these past weeks, the families and terrorist cells guarding us, the details of the kidnappings—everyone falls quiet. I don't know if the others have drifted off to sleep. I haven't. One of the guards sits just outside, in the corridor. I get up to go to the bathroom again and again. Eight times. Out of anxiety. Out of fear. Out of suffocation. Each time, I have to ask for permission. I stand at the doorway, call for the guard, and wait. When I return to my mattress, wedged between Almog and Hersh, I lie there listening to the breathing all around me. I can't tell if it's the breathing of sleep, or fear, or the short, shallow breaths of young men whose traumatic experiences are still burning them inside, still enveloping their hearts, still forcing their way, uninvited, into their dreams.

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I don't know how I got through the first night. How we all did. But we did. Our captors wake at 04:30 for their morning prayers. Their waking stirs us too. In shifts, we shuffle to the toilets with our leg cuffs and freshen up with what we have, at the sink. We all came here barefoot. I'm the only one who arrived with size-forty-one slippers, from the house. They become our communal bathroom shoes. From their first day in the tunnels, till the end, that's their only use. No matter his shoe size, whoever needs the bathroom squeezes into them and goes.

During the day, we talk and keep getting to know each other. Hersh and Ori have brought a backgammon board they made in their previous captors'

house. We play with it and with the deck of cards I brought with me. Everyone is struggling. On our second day here, someone sighs, and Ori looks at him and says to Hersh, "Hersh, tell them the sentence you kept telling me back at the house."

"What sentence?" we ask.

"Tell them," says Ori.

Hersh looks at us. "He who has a *why* can bear any *how*," he says.

I mull it over. The saying feels like a gift. It matches the spirit I am already in. Even before hearing the words, I'm already living them. I have a *why*. Many *why*s. And I'm focused on surviving, on living, on being. On returning, alive and well, to my family and my life. I have a *why*. The first night in the tunnels passes. Then the second. Soon another will pass. I can do this.

I can survive anything.

One day, as we eat our pitas, Ori Danino tells us about his family. He comes from an ultra-Orthodox, religiously observant home. He tells us about his father, a rabbinical scholar, and his own choice to lead a different life. At the end of the meal, I ask if he still remembers Birkat Hamazon, the Jewish Grace After Meals, by heart. "Of course," he says. I ask him to recite it for us. "The whole thing? Out loud?" he asks. I nod. We all nod and gather around him.

Ori closes his eyes and begins.

"Baruch atah Hashem Elokeinu, Melech ha'olam, hazan et ha'olam kulo betuvo …"

Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe, who, in His goodness, provides sustenance for the entire world with grace, with kindness, and with mercy. He gives food to all flesh, for His kindness is everlasting …

He recites the whole blessing, to the end. He incants, we listen quietly, and those words, unfamiliar to most of us, dissipate through the sealed tunnel,

dozens of feet beneath Gaza, and enter our hearts. I close my eyes. The words swirl around me: *You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing … Who provides food for all … Who gave our ancestors a precious, good, and spacious land … Have mercy, O Lord our God … We've never lacked, and may we never lack … May He who makes peace in His heights, make peace upon us …*

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On the third morning, Sa'id, whom we're nicknaming "the Mask" (since he's the only one who wears a face covering, at least in the beginning), and Nightingale enter our room and wake Hersh, Ori, and Almog. They jolt awake, disoriented, not sure what's happening. I'm already lying there, eyes open. Alon, Elia, and Or are still sleeping. The Mask and Nightingale tell Hersh, Ori, and Almog to get up and take their things. They're leaving. The three are confused, slow to move, trying to work out what's going on.

The Circle walks into the room. "*Yalla, yalla!*" he says. "You're going back home, back to mommy." He seems convinced. It doesn't feel like a trick. It feels like he, and the others, really believe it. Ori, Almog, and Hersh quietly get up and pack their few belongings into plastic bags. The Mask and Nightingale unchain Ori and take them to the corridor. A few seconds later, Ori returns. He forgot something, and he picks it up. Before he leaves again, I whisper, "Ori!"

He looks at me. "Goodbye, Eli. See you in Israel."

"See you in Israel," I reply. "Goodbye."

I figure the women and children have already been released as part of the deal, and now they've started releasing the wounded. Hersh, of course. But Ori and Almog are also recovering from serious injuries. It makes sense. I'm jealous. Deeply jealous. I want to go home too. But besides my envy, I'm also

happy for them, both because I'm glad they're leaving, and because this might be a good sign. *Men are being released now.* Maybe my release, our release, is imminent. Maybe they're moving toward a deal for all of us. The *hudna* is still holding. We know this from our captors, and from the silence. There are no air strikes. It's also a relief because we agreed among ourselves that whoever got out would update the others' families, send regards. And now someone can tell Lianne and the girls. Someone can tell my family. That I'm alive. I'm OK. I'm here.

When Alon, Or, and Elia wake up, they're startled that the other three have vanished. I explain that they left. "Maybe they took Ori for interrogation," they worry. Ori is a career soldier; he's hiding that from his captors. Almog and Hersh were also soldiers once. They're afraid their disappearance might be related to that. I disagree. I'm sure they're really going home. I tell them I'm sure *we're* going home too.

"There's no way they'll return to fighting while we're still here," I say with confidence.

We never see them again. We never hear from them again.

Hersh Goldberg-Polin. Almog Sarusi. Ori Danino.

5

The ceasefire continues for one more day.

From what we understand from our captors, the Circle and the Triangle, the *hudna* has been extended. But what comes next is already in doubt. It's shaky, they say. They keep us constantly updated about the phases of the ceasefire, the number of hostages released each day, and the various reports. They're still in high spirits, still euphoric from October 7, I guess, and the lull in fighting has calmed them down. From the fresh pitas we start receiving, we can tell the markets are open, the bakeries are working, there are supplies.

We still hope we'll be released too. *I* still have hope. Elia tells me he heard them say my name. They were talking about Eli Sharabi, he says. "You're probably next." I wish. On the morning of Friday, December 1, I get up to go to the bathroom. When I return, I see the Triangle standing in the doorway.

"*Hudna?*" I ask him.

He looks at me, forlorn. "Big war outside."

The ceasefire is over. I go back inside and tell the others. I'm not getting out. I'm not next. *We're* not next. It's not happening yet. We sit on our mattresses and talk it over. The news makes us sad. It makes *me* sad.

How could they go back to fighting while we're still trapped here? What's going on? We go over it again and again, analyzing events, speculating about what might be happening, what the plan is, where it's all headed. I assume the

fighting will last a few weeks. Maybe a month. And that's it. The next round will be short, like the last one. Our captors agree and say so all the time, to us and to themselves. "Take a deep breath," I tell Alon, Elia, and Or. "Give it a few weeks, and this too will pass."

Or is struggling more than the rest of us. Everyone has moments of tears, but in those early days, he takes it the hardest. He can't breathe, and I see him withdrawing into himself. I decide I'll talk to him, but I give him two days to cry it out, to wallow. I give him time. But after two days, tell him, "Or, it's OK to cry a bit," resting a hand on his shoulder. "But you have to snap out of it."

He's curled up like a fetus. "I can't," he says.

I take a breath. "It's OK to be homesick. It's OK to be sad," I tell him. "But self-pity, Or, that's the kind of thing that could break us. It could distract us from our mission. And our mission is to survive." He looks at me, tearing up. "We're not the ones to feel sorry for," I say. "The ones waiting for us outside, they're the unfortunate ones." Pause. "Remind me your wife and child's names?"

Or sobs. "My wife is Einav, and my son is Almog. He's two."

I nod. "So Einav and Almog are the ones left behind, in fear, not knowing what's become of you. They need you. They need you to survive. Focus on them. *You're* not the issue here. *They* are. They're the goal. You need to get back to your son, and this implosion isn't going to help you. It'll do the opposite."

Or listens. I can see how hard this is for him, but I need him to snap out of it. "How do you manage?" he asks me.

"Manage what?"

"To disconnect like that," he says. "How are you able to disconnect from everything and focus on the people who need us outside?"

I pause. Alon and Elia are sitting nearby on their mattresses, stealing glances our way. "That's the choice I made," I say quietly. "I want to survive. And this is how. This sadness, this crying, this self-pity. It's won't help you."

–

A routine begins. We get two meals a day. The first comes in the late morning, after our captors finish praying. The second comes in the evening.

We don't eat as well as we did in the houses aboveground, but we eat decently. Each of us gets a pita and a half per meal. The pitas are relatively fresh and filled with cheese, or *ful beans,* or hummus. Sometimes we even get pasta or something else. We're not starving. That's not our struggle right now.

We eat our meals in the corner of our cell, where our captors have placed a small table and chairs for us. We never leave this space, except to use the toilet and the nearby sink, where we freshen up each morning and brush our teeth with the toothbrushes provided by the Circle, and a single shared tube of toothpaste. The Circle also gives us basic medicines. He brings me eye drops for my dryness and ear drops for Alon's infection.

We take turns going to the bathroom, shuffling down the corridor with our legs still shackled and back again.

We never enter our captors' quarters. They come to us, to bring food and updates or just to talk. They come to sit with us in our room nearly every evening. The Circle likes talking politics. Over and over, he lays out his worldview, parroting Hamas talking points. Slogans like:

All of Palestine is ours, and only ours.
There's no room for the State of Israel, and there's no such thing.
Go back to where your parents or grandparents came from.
There won't be peace as long as you're on our land.

Our lives in Gaza are hard.
Conditions are tough and there's no money.
We're the victims.
Bibi wants to kill us all.

When he talks, we tread carefully, delicately, between speaking our minds and not contradicting him. We prefer to nod, to show empathy, as if we understand him, as if we really get them, as if they're totally fine. We want him to keep talking, to stay with us, to keep feeding us news, to keep sharing information. And for that, we're willing to endure his propaganda sermons.

One day, our captors film the four of us for a propaganda video. They prep the room to avoid revealing anything, and when everything is ready, they film each of us in turn. We have to state our names, where we're from, whom we miss back home … and of course, as per their orders, we each appeal to Prime Minister Netanyahu to get us out of here as soon as possible.

Most of the day, we're alone in our cell, just the four of us. We while away the hours with games, cards, and Hersh's backgammon set, which we got to keep. We pass the time by doing light exercise. And with prayer, especially Elia, who begins each morning in prayer, while the rest of us listen. We also talk. A lot. We begin to really get to know each other. In these early weeks, we keep going over our personal stories. The empty, endless hours give us space to explore each other's lives. Everything is still new, still interesting, still unknown. Jobs and hometowns. Families. Relationships. Parents. Siblings. Experiences. Travels.

These long days and deep conversations become a gateway into every detail of each other's lives. There's time to talk, to recount everything—our childhoods, our adolescence, our army service. The highs and the lows. Here we are, four men taking a journey through each other's lives, trekking through

memories and inner landscapes. We take turns hosting one another in our own stories, reminiscing about places, people, and moments from another world.

Since we're new to each other, we're curious about each other's stories. Time passes faster. We don't need to explain our own personalities; we come to understand each other's traits naturally. By now, I can already feel the gap between me and the others. I've got at least a decade and a half's head start on them. I'm also a father, so I've been practicing the art of self-sacrifice and living with people who need me for years. Or is also a dad, but I've been one for much longer. Over the past twenty years, I've also held challenging management roles, which have given me tools to navigate complex human dynamics and conflicts. For better or worse, I have a role to play here. They need me to manage this situation. To take responsibility not just for myself, but for them. The others are also part of my mission of survival. Each needs something different from me.

Alon and I form a bond. He tells me about his family. I tell him about mine. When he hears I'm from Be'eri, he says his brother volunteered there for a year before the army. He tells me his name. I remember him! He worked with my daughters. Alon tells me about his dreams. I tell him about mine. I see a sensitive, intelligent young man still traumatized by what he's had to endure.

He keeps revisiting the shelter and the moment he was abducted, in both his stories and his nightmares. I try to pull him out of it. "Tell me something beautiful from your life," I beg him. "Something good that happened recently."

He thinks for a moment. "I just got back from an eight-month trip abroad."

"Where?"

"Vietnam, then the Philippines," he whispers.

"Great," I say, smiling. "Tell me about it."

Alon smiles a sad smile. "About all eight months?"

"Yes! Are you in a rush somewhere?"

He chuckles and tells me about scuba diving in the Philippines. I tell him I love diving too. That it's the most fun and magical thing in the world. Alon feels the same way. We go diving together in our imagination. Drifting for a few moments into a turquoise world of fish and reefs and sun in a world far, far away.

Last July, near the end of his global tour, Alon's parents and sister flew to meet him in Thailand and travel together. They spent two weeks together in Ko Samui and Ko Pha Ngan. He loves recounting their amazing time together and what he discovered about himself on the trip. When he left Israel, in January, none of his friends believed he'd survive even a month alone. By the time he met his parents, with a fresh tan and incredible experiences, he was a champion.

In another conversation, Alon and I work out that our birthdays are close together. Alon was born on February 10. I was born February 13. Three days apart. "You're February too?" Alon laughs. "Everyone's February."

"Who's everyone?" I ask.

"My sister. My grandma. She's February 13, like you. And a cousin."

I realize Alon is very sensitive, smart, and talented, but he still lacks the emotional resilience to cope. He's not in survival mode. It shows when it comes to food. We're not being starved at this stage. We have food. But not much. We get a *siniyah* between us per meal: a tray with a little rice, meat or *ful* beans. Each of us has a pita and a half to scoop out of the tray. From the others' behavior, I realize they've got a basic lack of situational awareness. Dividing the food fairly will require communication and management. It's got to happen, if we want to survive. At first, I manage the situation for myself, to protect my own rations. I tell them I don't like to scoop my food: I'll just fill

my pita, and they can scoop freely. They're fine with that. I realize that if I don't fill my own pita, there'll be nothing left for me. Nobody here is acting out of malice. They just have an unconscious blind spot, and a narrow, undeveloped way of thinking.

But while I've found a solution for myself, Alon keeps getting sidelined and left with nothing to scoop. I try to open up a conversation about it. I believe in stating things bluntly. But they don't understand. It's not that they're lying; they just don't see the problem with their behavior. I try to enlist Alon's help to explain. But he's such a gentle soul that he prefers to retreat than to confront them. After one such conversation, I tell him, "Alon, save Mr. Nice Guy for the bars on Dizengoff Street. For parties and life outside. Here, you've got to dare to speak your mind. You've got to stand your ground. You've got to survive."

Alon is struggling. I see he needs me. So I double down. When he breaks down or cries, when all three of them break down or cry, I'm there for them. "You want to fall apart? You want to cry?" I ask them. "Go cry. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen. That's it. Snap out of it. Go back to playing a game. Go back to praying. Go back to talking, to working out. Go back to surviving."

One of the stories the three of them tell me is about a young man from the rocket shelter, whom they didn't know from before. Just after the terrorists brutally manhandled them into a pickup truck to steal them into Gaza, and just before they drove off, he suddenly decided to jump out. The terrorists shot him on the spot, leaving him dead on the road. "He knew they'd kill him, but he chose to die and not get kidnapped," they told me, arguing among themselves about whether he did the right thing and whether they can understand his choice. I push back and say, "You've always got a choice, you get that, right?" They stare at me. "You've always, always got a choice," I

repeat. "Feel that choice. Let it give you strength. Remember there's always something, something small, that's still in your hands."

One day, they ask me, "But, Eli, when do *you* fall apart? When do *you* cry?"

I close my eyes briefly. "Eventually, this will all be over. However long it takes—a week, a month, six months, two years—it's going to end. We'll get out of here. We won't be stuck in a dark tunnel. We won't be in Hamas's hands. We'll go home. And when that gate closes behind me, when I know I'm in the IDF's hands, when this nightmare is *really* over … *then* you'll see me fall apart. *Then* you'll see me cry. But until then, I'm on a mission to survive. So are you."

In the end, despite all my effort to hold myself together, they see me cry.

Long before any of that happens.

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The Triangle is the commander of our tunnel. Under him are five captors. Every day, we hear them talking on the landline, speaking to someone giving them orders. That much is clear from his tone of voice and how silently they listen. They put him on speakerphone. He must be the Triangle's commanding officer.

And then one day, he arrives. We don't realize that it's him at first. But his familiar voice, the way he speaks to them, the way the other captors look at him, and the awe that surrounds him leave no doubt. He's their commander. We refer to him, among ourselves, as "Peaky" because he's on top. He arrives with another terrorist, a redhead who looks like his assistant. Naturally, we call him "the Orange." Peaky puts an end to the discussions that our captors used to hold with us in our cell every evening. That's clear because they suddenly

stop visiting. I also know, because I understand them speaking Arabic, that he instructed them to speak to us only when necessary and to stop the chitchat.

Our captors retreat to a more functional relationship: they just bring food, meet our needs, issue orders. That's what it's like the whole time Peaky is around. But one evening, Nightingale suddenly rushes into our cell, sits beside me, and whispers, "Ya Eli, I saw your wife and daughters on TV. At a protest." My eyes immediately fill with tears. "They're fighting for you," he whispers. "You've got amazing daughters." He quickly slips out. I remain seated. As soon as he backs away, I burst into tears. It's the second time I have cried in captivity.

The mention of my daughters breaks me. The sign of life makes my heart contract and expand at the same time. *They're alive.* I have proof. *They survived October 7.* They're waiting for me. They're OK. They're fighting for me.

Or, Elia, and Alon come over. They hug me. They ask what happened, surprised to see me crying. I tell them what Nightingale whispered. They're relieved for me. After a short while, when I calm down, I look at them. "There's no way to really know," I say softly. "He doesn't actually know if those were my daughters." They look at me, silent. "There's no way to know," I repeat. "He might've seen my nieces and decided they were my daughters. I mean, all the Sharabi girls look exactly the same. Maybe it was them. Maybe it wasn't."

I wipe the tears from my face. "There's no way to know," I whisper.

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Even underground, we hear the air strikes. They are usually muffled, like an explosion miles away. Sometimes they are closer and louder, and it feels like an

earthquake has hit the tunnel. The air stirkes are alarming, but they don't scare us. We feel protected here.

What we fear is something else. Every time we walk and feel our leg cuffs, we remember why they're there. Our legs are shackled to stop us from escaping if the IDF tries to rescue us. So our captors can kill us first. We have no doubt: no matter how close we feel, if it came to it, none of them would blink before putting a bullet in our brains. Not the Circle, however much care he takes of us; not Nightingale, however much he talks to us; and not even Smiley, however much halva he smuggles for us. They'd all do it, without exception.

That's what we fear: that IDF commandos will try to enter the tunnel to rescue us by force. Because we know it would never work, and it'd be the end. The end of us. And the end of them. We pray they won't even think about it and try to contact them by telepathy: *Don't come in here. Don't die. Don't get us killed.* There's also the constant fear that one of our captors will receive bad news, maybe the death of a loved one, and go berserk, storm in, and slaughter us.

The air strikes get closer and closer until, very early in the morning on January 5, 2024, day forty in this tunnel, we hear a deafening explosion right above our heads and the power goes out. After a few seconds in pitch darkness, battery-powered flashlights flicker on. Panic and chaos in the tunnel. We hear the trapdoor above slam shut, followed by bricks crashing down with force.

We realize the mosque above us was bombed and probably collapsed. Or is extremely shaken. He's afraid the IDF is coming and that our captors will execute us all. We hear our captors panicking, speaking loudly, agitated. They say nothing to us. We sit on our mattresses, confused, afraid, wondering what's about to happen. Elia says maybe Hersh, Almog, and Ori guided the IDF to

this mosque. Maybe during questioning, they told the army where the Hamas tunnel was. That's why the air strike was here. As always, we're speculating.

After half an hour of confusion and tension, I hear Peaky booming at the captors and realize they've decided to evacuate. They start packing. We hear them collecting large bags, food, medicine, gear—everything in the tunnel. Finally, they come and explain we're all moving. "Pack your stuff." We gather our few belongings. We can't take the blankets or pillows. I throw my few extra clothes and eye drops in a bag. We also pack our cards, a book someone brought, and Hersh's backgammon set. Everyone is anxious. There's a lot of uncertainty.

Our captors say we're leaving, and we understand, of course. We *can't* stay here. But where are we going? What's next? How will we even get out safely? What's waiting for us there? Every move, every transition, every exposure, whether to people or to air strikes, is life or death for us. Every step is a risk. Anything can go wrong. I look at the others. I see Or and Alon's eyes. Uneasy. Tense. I squeeze Or's shoulder and whisper, "It'll be OK."

We head into the corridor. They unshackle our legs. We begin walking through the tunnel, down to the other end. Not toward the mosque shaft we entered through, but a different one. Peaky leads us in a line. The captors have headlamps. We stumble along. It takes forever. The line keeps stopping. We don't understand the reason for the holdup. I assume it's because they're scared. Waiting for the right moment to emerge. Afraid of air strikes. Afraid of the IDF.

Eventually, we reach the second shaft. There's a one-hundred-foot ladder. We have to climb out. The ladder scares me. I look at it—there's nothing to grip. I'm afraid I'll slip. In the dark, suddenly we see four Hamas fighters standing below the ladder. They're clearly militants: weapons, vests, ninja masks, combat gear. Our regular captors don't dress like this. The Hamas

fighters glower at us. They strike us with small, humiliating blows and make throat-slitting gestures at us. We stand silently, heads lowered, not reacting.

Their presence heightens the tension. We are careful not to make any sudden movements that might provoke them. Peaky and the Triangle climb first and hoist the bags up with ropes. We wait at the bottom. When the bags are up, it's our turn to climb. First Or, then me, then Elia, then Alon.

When I emerge, I look around. We're in a reinforced concrete structure, like a bunker. To the right, I see what looks like a school building. Outside, deathly silence. Before we leave, the Triangle tells us to walk in pairs. He warns us that if anyone makes a wrong move, shouts, or says anything, they'll get a bullet on the spot.

We begin walking. Sunlight strokes our faces for the first time in forty days. I feel like I'm walking through an apocalyptic landscape, an actor in a Hollywood movie with an outlandish storyline. There's not a soul around us. Everything is destroyed. Scraps of iron, concrete, glass. An eerie wasteland with the occasional whistle of bullets or mortars in the distance.

I've been paired with the Cleaner. We move through the rubble, building to building, trying to follow the Triangle and Or, the pair ahead of us. At one point, we lose sight of them. We try to turn back, go another way—nothing. No one in sight. Whistling bullets pierce the heavy silence. We're lost, until we hear Peaky whistle, calling us, directing us into a building that looks like it used to be someone's home. As we head toward it, an explosion erupts nearby.

The Cleaner panics. We start running. We enter the building, breathless. Inside are Smiley, Elia, the Triangle, and Or. It dawns on me that since we entered the tunnel, we haven't heard a strike this close. Even the mosque explosion sounded muffled in comparison. We wait inside the building for a few minutes till the others catch up, and then we leave again in pairs, scuttling from hideout to hideout. Outside, the wreckage piles up like mountains,

forming heaps of debris, plastic, and metal. The Cleaner walks next to me with his weapon drawn, looking around nervously. I'm finding it hard to walk, both because the ground is uneven and because I haven't really walked in forty days.

I'm not thinking about the air strikes. Or the pain of walking. Or the fear. I'm just focused on reaching wherever we're going. Finishing this specific mission.

Suddenly, a thought crosses my mind: *If I see IDF soldiers, I'm going to make a break for it.* Whatever the cost. And if I can't run, I'll at least signal to them. Throw a stone. Pick something off the floor. Find a piece of fabric to wave at them. Maybe the Cleaner will shoot me. But I won't miss my chance.

As it happens, we don't see any IDF forces. I move a little ahead, the Cleaner close behind, guiding me. From time to time, we have to clamber over piles of rubble. Up and down. Up and down. Seeking the next hideout.

Finally, the Cleaner points to a damaged building, and we enter. Inside are Or and the Triangle. They lead us to a small room with a large iron door. The Triangle opens it. We see stairs leading down, as if leading to a basement.

We begin to descend.

The stairs are steep.

I count seventy in all.

At the bottom, there's a dark tunnel path.

We walk inside and feel the slope deepen beneath our feet.

We're back in a tunnel.

6

We walk through the dark corridor of the new tunnel. It isn't *new*, of course, just new *to us*. It's a narrow corridor, too narrow for even two people to walk side by side. It's maybe six feet high at most. Or is tall, and so are some of our captors, so they have to stoop to avoid hitting their heads on the concrete arches.

We grope our way forward by the light of our captors' headlamps. Like in the last tunnel, the air is humid, and the floor is just packed dirt. It's a longer walk than the one from the mosque shaft to the living area in our previous tunnel. Eventually, we reach a paved section. These must be the living quarters.

I look left and right, and we can immediately see: this tunnel is in a far worse state than the last one. Everything is smaller: the kitchen, the bathroom, the sleeping quarters. Smaller, and a mess. There's no electricity, and when our captors check the faucets, we realize there's no running water either. They look angry. We, and they, are going to have to learn to cope with the conditions here.

The scattered objects, the open cabinets, the gear strewn across the floor … all hint that there were people here recently who left in a rush. Who, though? Hamas fighters? Was this a command post? Maybe there were hostages? Who knows. When we left the previous tunnel, our captors packed and organized everything. Here, no one bothered to tidy up before deserting

it. Our captors shove us into a small room to wait as they begin sorting the mess.

Alon and the Mask arrive last. "What took you so long?" we ask Alon when he enters.

"We went into one of the abandoned houses to take food, medicine, water, blankets," he tells us. "The place was in ruins. I saw IDF flyers on the floor, telling everyone in the neighborhood to evacuate."

I nod. "That explains the deathly silence outside."

"That walk out there was one of the scariest things I've ever done," chimes Elia. We all nod quietly in agreement.

It takes a few seconds for our eyes to adjust to the darkness. We see various objects strewn on the floor. Because there's no electricity, the only light is from our captors' headlamps. Quickly and quietly, we scoop up anything worth keeping: a woolly cap, a used shirt, some paracetamol, a small towel, and, to our astonishment, a bottle of Fanta! A full bottle of bright orange Fanta, glowing in a dark tunnel in the bowels of Gaza. We decide we're drinking it. Right here. Right now. Before our captors see. We're drinking, no matter what.

I walk out to the corridor, point at a bottle of water on the ground, and ask the Mask if I can drink it. "I'm really thirsty," I say. He picks up the bottle, gives it a taste check, and hands it to me. "*Shukran*," I say. *Thank you.* I return to the small room. We open the Fanta bottle and pass it around surreptitiously. We each take a swig and pass it around. In a few minutes flat, it's empty. It tastes divine. Not just because we're dehydrated from the tension, the exhausting walk, and the fear, *but because it's sweet*. It's something sweet to drink, deep underground, in a tunnel laden with fear and anxiety. Something sweet that reminds us of the outside world. Of home. Of the simplicities of life.

When the bottle is empty, Elia sneaks over to the kitchenette across from our room and quietly drops it into a large trash can. He tiptoes back. Our captors are still working hard to organize the tunnel.

Suddenly, the Circle asks loudly, "Where's the Fanta?"

The others look at him. "What Fanta?"

"There was a Fanta!" he hollers, approaching us. "Where is it?!" he yells.

We stare at him blankly. "We didn't see any Fanta here!" I tell him.

"You're lying!" he shouts. "I *saw* a full bottle of Fanta when we entered!"

We shake our heads, feigning cluelessness.

We swear we have no idea what he's talking about!

Our captors gather around.

"They're lying," the Circle growls.

"Ask him," I say, pointing at the Mask. "Ask him! I just asked him for water. We were thirsty. We drank water. That's it. No Fanta."

The Circle looks at the Mask, who nods. He glowers at us with burning suspicion. He clearly doesn't believe us, but he has no proof.

Eventually, he gives up and drops it.

We exhale in relief.

A small act of rebellion.

A tiny, orange, sweet victory.

–

Difficult days lie ahead.

This tunnel lacks basic supplies and equipment. It doesn't even have a landline for our captors, and they spend several days trying to set one up. Our only food is what they brought with them from the previous tunnel. In the kitchenette across from our cell, there's no gas. No way to cook the dry food.

Like before, our captors sleep in the space next to ours. There's no corridor connecting the rooms, just a narrow opening at the edge of the wall.

For the first three days in this tunnel, we eat nothing but biscuits. Two or three in the morning. Two or three at night. Biscuits and water. That's it.

After three days, they bring us some raw *ful* beans. I start feeling weak. My body needs real food. I think it takes them nearly two weeks to get pitas into the tunnel. They're stale, probably foraged from the street. I don't care. I savor the single pita bread I'm given and devour it slowly. Besides the pitas, they give us a can of cream cheese. I break my pita into pieces, dip each one into the cheese, and chew slowly. I save the last morsel for the end of the day, just to fall asleep with *something* in my stomach.

After two weeks of surviving on biscuits, one daily can of cheese between four men, and a handful of stale pitas, a gas burner finally arrives. We hope things will start to improve. They clearly have supply issues. That's clear soon enough. Unlike in the previous tunnel, there are no regular deliveries. All they have is what they manage to scavenge outside. And outside, there's hardly anything. Hunger sets in. Not from deliberate starvation, but from scarcity. For them too. Sure, they eat more than us, and better. But even they don't have much. The shortages make them more irritable. Less patient with us. We're careful not to cross them, not to speak out of line, not to make any requests.

We're impatient too. The hunger turns each man inward. Empathy dries up. These are hard moments. When everything you are, everything *I* am, is reduced to one thing: hunger. Nothing else matters. Slowly, our captors manage to sneak in more supplies. Because our room faces the kitchenette, we see them cooking and eating. They don't like that. We're too exposed to the contrast between their food and ours. They cook flatbread over the burner. Sometimes, when they have sugar and oil, they make sweets—for themselves. Right in front of us.

The Mask and Smiley remain nice to us, even in these conditions. Sometimes they sneak us treats: halva, a scoop of sesame seeds, a small pita. But food is scarce. The stale pitas that arrive every few days give us a glimpse of the world above: The bakeries aren't operating. There's no food coming in. Sometimes they manage to bring rice or pasta; they cook some and give us a little.

We have no mattresses. At night, we spread our blankets on the ground and sleep on them, in pain. Our toothpaste from the previous tunnel runs out after three weeks. We brush our teeth with plain brushes. After a few months, we get a new tube, but it only lasts a month, even after we agree to ration it and use toothpaste once every other day. There's no toilet paper. We clean up in the bathroom with a water bottle. There are jerricans in the tunnel: some for drinking, hauled down by our captors, and others, not safe to drink, for washing and toilet use. We reuse the same water to wash our hands, clean ourselves off after using the toilet, and refill the water tank, since there is no running water.

Our rations keep shrinking, and with them, the frequency of our bathroom visits. We do not share toilets with our captors. We have ours; they have theirs. They clean theirs, not ours. Soap is a rare commodity. When they have some, they give us a little. At first more often. Then much less. Eventually, not at all.

Our hygiene deteriorates. Our bodies are filthy. We go for weeks without showering. Our clothes are never washed. Our space is never cleaned. And there's no way to clean it. Everything becomes gross. In the last tunnel, we got to shower twice in forty days. Here, not even that. We shower once every six or eight weeks. With a bucket. And a bit of soap. Every time we shower, we're shocked by how dirty our bodies are. The layers of grime. I scrub and I scrub

with the little soap I have. I never knew the human body could collect so much filth.

We constantly pray we won't get sick. We realize how easily it could happen. Diseases we'd never worry about at home, infections that shouldn't occur, could *absolutely* happen here. I'm spared most of them, thankfully. But not the others. Or, Alon, and Elia suffer from constant diarrhea. Frequent vomiting. Fungal infections. Nails falling off. My problem is mostly dizziness. I think it's because I'm so weak.

Another week passes. And then another. The days crawl by and pile atop of each other. The cesspit under the toilet stops draining. Everything spills over. The raw sewage rises to the surface, adding to the unbearable stink, which spreads and worsens with every passing day. I don't know how to describe it. How do you convey what it feels like to be swallowed in such a suffocating odor? It's a stench you never get used to.

At some point, worm colonies start to form around us. I can't see them: I'm shortsighted and left my glasses behind on the path in Be'eri. But the others can. They describe tiny white worms multiplying in the toilet tank, in the stagnant sewage drains, by the sink, on the floor, on our toothbrushes.

We tell our captors about the worms. It scares them. Over time, we understand: they care about our health. Not because they care about *us*. Because they care about *themselves*. If one of us gets seriously ill, things become complicated. They can't provide proper medical care down here. And moving even *one* of us to a medical facility aboveground would be a major operation.

Their job is to keep us alive, for as long as possible. That's clear to us. And to them. That's why they're here: to shoot us if IDF soldiers arrive to rescue us, and to keep us alive unless and until that happens.

We are bargaining chips.

They need bargaining chips.

And they need bargaining chips with a pulse.

Our captors bring us some sort of tool to try to unclog the cesspit, hoping to make things better. It's no help. We simply get used to living with the worms. We rinse our toothbrushes before each use. We tread carefully on the floor. We rush in and out of the bathroom to avoid lingering too long. Every morning, we check our bodies to make sure we're not covered in worms. It doesn't always work. Eventually, we surrender to them. We accept they're here to stay.

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The reduced rations compared to the previous tunnel, the endless days, and the gruesome sanitary conditions deepen the divides between us, which already started forming in the first tunnel. They challenge our sense of togetherness. Four men, crammed into one small space. Ankles shackled. Buried under the heavy soil of Gaza. With barely any food. Poor hygiene. And a group of captors who could, at any moment, decide they're sick of us, or want to beat us, or—God knows why—be told to dispose of us. Four men, living in suffocating proximity to fear, longing, darkness, despair, bathed in that ubiquitous stench.

There are many moments when each of us has to make a choice: Do I do what I need to survive, the others be damned? Or do I treat them as my equals? Do I eat, even if it means someone else goes hungry, just because I'm scared of starving? Or do I exercise self-control, hold back, and think of them too?

Time and again, we break into arguments. Disagreements keep erupting, especially over the allocation of our meager resources: How do we split meals

that keep shrinking? How do we ration toothpaste to last longer for all of us? On the rare occasions we receive new clothes, maybe once a month or two, how do we divide them between us?

Too often, we drown in frustration and fights. Our living space is tiny but seemingly large enough to contain the gaping chasm between us. I keep noticing that difference I spotted at the start, between me and the others. I was also their age once. Before my daughters, even before Lianne. When no one else depended on me, and the only person I had to worry about was myself. Because no matter how kind and considerate you are, you never really learn the art of sharing until you share your life with someone else. You never learn to truly *see* other people until you tie your fate to theirs. And now here we are, our fates bound together like our ankles, against our will.

And we clash:

Who ate more?

Who snores?

Who talks too much?

Who gets on everyone's nerves?

We clash to the point of eruptions of anger, to the point of saying things we shouldn't say, to the point that even our captors intervene and shout, "*Uskut!*" *Shut up!* We clash until there's a heavy, suffocating silence.

There are long, dark days when I lie on my blanket, facing the filthy tunnel wall, feeling all my energy, all *our* energy, getting sapped into the tension between us. More than into our captors, or the hunger or filth, or even the terror. We spend all our strength just trying to cope with each other.

We form camps. It's amazing how four people trapped in impossible conditions can still split into factions. Into tribes. Little clans of disdain and anomie. We don't argue over great ideologies, the meaning of life, or the future of Israeli society. Oh no. We argue over food. Over soap. Over who gets the

new shirt that just got tossed in. Who gets the blanket. The pillow. We argue over how best to survive. Like I did for many years in Kibbutz Be'eri, here too, I become the treasurer. The manager. Every allocation of resources becomes a task to be managed, and I insist on managing it fairly. Even at the risk of a shouting match or mudslinging. Unto every man, what he needs and deserves.

There are days when I'm stunned by how different we are from each other. By how our different backgrounds have shaped our perspectives, our individual ability to see the bigger picture. I was the farm manager at Kibbutz Be'eri for many years. I have held various leadership and management roles. I thought I knew people. Thought I understood the human psyche. But this? This is a challenge. Here, I have to take a completely different approach to managing relationships. Here, I have come face-to-face with value systems unlike my own, and I have to work hard to understand them. To have compassion. To be patient.

I'm rediscovering my parental side. My fatherly style. My role as the responsible adult. I lean into it. And I'm disappointed to discover my own impatience. My bluntness. My need to speak plainly, to speak the truth as I see it. My inability to hide how I feel when someone acts in a way I think is wrong. Without realizing that what I say hurts. Without realizing that even if it's true, there might be a better way of putting it.

My connection with Alon deepens. He helps me learn how to say hard things gently. And I help him learn to say what he feels, without fear, without backing down. Alon and I talk a lot. I look at him and see my own values reflected. Life in communal settlement. The same kind of family mindset. We sit on blankets, our backs against the wall, and speak in hushed whispers.

"Tell me more about yourself," Alon asks.

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about your daughters. About Noiya and Yahel. What are they like?"

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I try to block out the stench, the discomfort, the hunger. I try to visualize only them. My Yahel. My Noiya. Not with their eyes frozen in terror in our rocket shelter at home, face-to-face with the terrorists who snatched me. But with bright, joyful eyes. Full of laughter.

"They're very different from each other, my Noiya and Yahel," I begin. "Noiya, my eldest, is incredibly sensitive. Mature for her age. Very smart. Even when she was in preschool, her teachers were shocked by her level of conversation. They'd say, sometimes they forgot she was only four. And even as she got older, we always noticed that she was different from the other girls, in terms of how they spoke, how they saw the world. Of course, she's still a teenager, you know. Social media. Hours in front of the mirror, all that."

Alon smiles and nods.

"But there's something very mature about her," I continue. "She understands life. She knows how to express herself. Lianne and I are very open with the girls. We put everything on the table. We talk about everything. Noiya's friends know that in our house, they can talk about anything, that we won't freak out, that if our daughter wants to smoke or drink, we'd rather she do it near us, not in a basement or in secret, so we can still play a meaningful role in her life.

"And Yahel …" I pause and smile. "Yahel is the polar opposite. If Noiya is calm and calculated, Yahel's like a coiled spring. She's a genius, but a genius who can't sit still for even a second. A brilliant kid with ants in her pants, you know? Noiya has to work hard to succeed at school. We spend hours together on homework and prepping for tests. And she gets top marks, but only with serious effort. Yahel has a brilliant mind. She could get a perfect score on any

test without even trying. But she can't sit still. She can't focus. She's into extremes. Know what she wanted to do for her twelfth birthday?" I ask.

"What?" says Alon.

"Skydiving," I say.

"Skydiving?! When she was twelve?" Alon is shocked.

I nod with a smile.

"And you let her?"

I nod again. Alon laughs.

"You can't say no to her," I say.

"We took her skydiving, and you wouldn't believe how much fun she had. Totally fearless. She just jumped out of that plane, screaming with joy. We watched from the ground—me, Lianne, and Noiya—terrified. And there she was, roaring with joy through the open sky." I pause, smiling. Picturing Yahel. In the wide-open sky. Her laughter. The crisp air. Lianne and Noiya standing beside me, looking up. "When we finally started giving her Ritalin, she was able to sit down and study," I continue. "And then everyone saw what we already knew: that she's brilliant. Sharp as a whip."

Alon looks at me. I miss them so much. "Tell me more!" he says. "Don't stop!"

I take a breath. "Noiya has a huge heart," I say. "She used to volunteer a lot. Besides working in the kibbutz's day care, where they adored her, she also volunteered with autistic children in the local area. She became really attached to them, they became attached to her, and it really started filling her life, and she did it in her own free time. Yahel, that big ball of energy, really loves soccer."

"Soccer?" Alon asks.

"Soccer!"

"We signed her up for a team. She loves it. She even watches matches with me. Just me and her on the couch, sitting there focused, loving the game."

I go quiet and look at Alon. "We'll get out of here, Alon," I tell him. "No matter how long it takes."

"How do you know?" he asks.

"I just do. I believe it. I hold on to it. I cling to it. There's no doubt in my mind. We're getting out." Alon is silent. "They need us out there," I tell him. "My daughters. My wife. My mom. My siblings. Your parents. Your siblings. They all need us. We're on a mission to survive. Even if we come out injured. Broken. Missing a hand, missing an eye … As long as we're alive. *Believe it.*"

Alon stays silent.

"Believe it, Alon."

–

Ramadan is approaching. There are still no bakeries open in the bombed-out streets aboveground. We still get pitas, but they're still stale. Our captors bring them after their raids outside, maybe every two or three weeks. They drop a sack into the tunnel, and that's our food for the next two weeks. By the end, the pitas are moldier and drier than ever. To make them edible, our captors heat them a little on the gas stove. It helps to dull the bland, awful taste.

A new captor arrives in the tunnel. His very prominent unibrow earns him, from us, the affectionate nickname "Eyebrow." One day, I hear him talking about Hezbollah and the situation in the north, and I realize Israel's northern towns are being heavily shelled. Without thinking, I blurt out, "Bloody Arabs!" Our tunnel's acoustics carry every word, straight to our captors. And it drives them bananas. Led by Eyebrow, who turns out to be

especially short-tempered, our captors storm into our cell and start yelling and cursing at all of us.

I try to explain that I didn't say what they think I said. That they misunderstood. But they heard exactly what I said. If I'd just cursed Hezbollah, maybe they would have let it slide. But I cursed *all of them*, and that set them off. They punish us all: from now on, no more reheated pitas. We'll have to eat them cold. As dry as they came. Our captors' fury frightens Alon. The punishment angers Or and Elia. Quite rightly. It was a careless outburst that hurt all of us. I apologize profusely. But they refuse to accept my apology. And I get it.

Or and Elia's rage, at the situation and at me, sparks another round of bitter infighting. Things better left unsaid get said. I swallow my pride. "Just you see," I tell Alon, trying to reassure him. "Give it two or three weeks, and our captors will forget all about this. Don't be afraid."

And that's what happens. Eventually, they let it go.

But Ramadan, which we thought might be easier food-wise, since our captors are making sweets for themselves, ends up being harder on us. We keep getting two meals a day. But now they're even more meager and dry. During Ramadan, their prayer routine intensifies. Their whole daily routine flips. They fast during the day and eat and pray all night. That makes it hard for us to fall asleep. Our days and nights are reversed. And not for one day. For a whole month.

Even when Ramadan ends, our sleep is still disrupted. We talk a lot at night. Alon and I whisper in hushed tones. But Elia and Or struggle to keep their voices down. Our captors hear them. It disturbs their sleep. They get angry. "If you don't go to sleep, no food tomorrow!" they yell. We quiet down a bit.

But we're too alert to sleep. Our captors hear Elia and Or talking again. Eventually, they decide to flip our schedule back, by force. So we won't disturb their rest. At 07:00, they wake us up. They force us to stay awake all day, shouting at us to make sure we don't fall asleep. They take turns monitoring us to be sure no one dozes off. It's draining. We're desperate for some shut-eye.

To stay awake, and to strengthen our ailing bodies, we exercise. Even though they've banned us from exercising. We don't know why. Maybe it's so we won't get injured; maybe it's so we won't get strong. Maybe it's so we won't sweat and get even smellier. In any case, despite their prohibition, we work out quietly. Without them noticing. With whatever we can. We lift water bottles like dumbbells. We raise and lower the fans that are in the room. We do squats. Push-ups. Sit-ups. It becomes part of our daily routine.

Part of our effort to keep our bodies alive.

To keep our souls alive.

To maintain our liberty.

To keep surviving.

7

I will survive.

Because I want to live.

Because I've *got* to live.

Elia and Or left their partners behind in the blood-soaked rocket shelter near Kibbutz Reim. Elia left his girlfriend, Ziv, there. Or left Einav, his wife and the mother of their only child. When they were brutally snatched from the shelter, dragged into a pickup truck, and carted into Gaza, they managed to glimpse a terrorist entering and spraying bullets at the young people still inside. They understand that their partners were probably murdered, and there are moments when they totally break down. I try to pick them up, to lift their spirits, to help them focus on *why* they must survive. I tell them anything could have happened. I press for details. "Was the terrorist standing up when he opened fire?" I ask them. They say yes. "Then Ziv and Einav probably lay down and survived!" *You never know.* I ask them to believe that the women they love are waiting for them outside, and to remember they must be strong for them.

I work on filling them with hope that their partners are still alive.

Same with me. I've also got to believe that Lianne and my girls are alive. I've got to believe that Yossi, my brother, who also lives near me in Be'eri with his family, is alive. That he, his wife, and their children also survived the

massacre and are waiting for me. I've just got to. Among all the possibilities constantly racing through my mind, I keep the worst possibility of all somewhere at the back, but I refuse to give it much space. *I'm not going to dwell there.* I've got to believe they're all right so I can hold on for them, so I can survive for them. The belief that they're alive, my concern for them, gives me strength. They are my mission. If one of our captors snuck me a phone and let me have a single call, to say just one sentence, I'd ring someone in my family and tell them I'm OK. That's it. That's what I'd focus on, putting them at ease. Because I'm here, and *I* know I'm OK, that I'm alive, but they've got no idea what happened to me. The worry must be eating them up inside. I'm keeping focused on them.

But I don't want to survive just for them. I don't want to live just for them. I want to live for myself too. For me, Eli Sharabi. I want to live. I love life. I crave it. I want to breathe life, to walk free, to return to the open skies, to go back home, to work, to purpose. To return to the sea, to diving, to hiking, to the Jewish holidays we celebrate as a nuclear family in Israel and those we celebrate with Lianne's family in Britain. To return to the roads, to driving, to walking down the street, to my simple, regular, worry-free day-to-day.

I use the cold, hard logic I've developed over the years. I tell myself: *Eli, focus. It is what it is.* This is the situation. You have no idea what's happened to your family. You have no way of knowing their fate. You have no control over how much food you're given, no control over how clean your environment is, no control over your freedom. So focus on what you can control. Channel your strength toward the things you *can* manage—and stay yourself.

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Unlike the previous tunnel, this one doesn't have a television. Our captors get their information through a landline phone they managed to install after much effort. Some of that information trickles down to us. There are days when they suddenly rejoice and bellow, "*Allahu Akbar!*" and then we gather that something bad has happened in Israel or to IDF soldiers. Whenever something like that happens, they rush over to deliver the news to us with great pride. We don't know what's true and what isn't. They could tell us that Hamas has blown up thousands of Israeli tanks, shot down an IDF helicopter, or killed thousands of Israeli soldiers outside. They make sure to tell us, of course, about the three hostages who tried to escape and were killed by IDF fire. They make a point of sharing *that* piece of information. To make us understand what happens to anyone who tries to run. To make us angry at the IDF.

At one point, they receive a piece of news that makes them cheer at the top of their lungs in prayer and jubilation. We try to figure out what happened, and they claim that right as we speak, Hamas fighters managed to capture Israeli soldiers during the fighting in Gaza. "*Mahtufin jdeed!*" they call to us in excitement, in ecstasy. *New captives!* They pour each other celebratory coffee and bring out sweets. The news seems entirely genuine, and it's crushing.

We know that even if they are exaggerating the numbers, there is clearly a battle raging outside and it's costing lives. Israeli soldiers are obviously getting killed. And it pains us. Whenever our captors are happy, we're downbeat. They don't share their bad news. We don't go there at all. Some days their moods seem darker: they lose patience with us and don't even answer our "good morning." On those days, we assume something bad has happened on their side. But they never say what.

Our captors are always relaying the Israeli news to us. Especially the Triangle. He comes into our cell and explains that Bibi cares only about staying

in power, that he doesn't care about the hostages, and that the whole reason for the war is his criminal trial and fear of going to jail. He keeps parroting the same points, and we realize that he's been consuming the Israeli media.

Every evening, the Circle gets a phone call. We hear it: in a tunnel, everything echoes. It's an update about how many *shaheeds* they've had that day in Gaza. How many "martyrs." Every evening he gets a report with the numbers. And they're big. We feel the Circle, who started off relatively decent and took care of our needs, growing colder. Consumed in ever more fury.

The fighting outside continues. We know from the muffled air strikes. We also know because, at some point, some of the guards leave the tunnel, and we realize they've been called up to fight because Hamas needs more fighters. Even the Cleaner and the Mask, Sa'ad and Sa'id, who were with me back in the first house, get called up. A few days before the Cleaner is sent into battle, which we know because we overhear their conversation, I see how hard it is for him. Suddenly, I hear him crying during prayers. He kneels on the floor and weeps, like a child. I see him pacing the tunnel anxiously. He's clearly scared; he doesn't want to go. He's clearly not a trained fighter; he knows going into battle means likely death. On the day he leaves, I hear the Triangle giving him a pep talk, trying to lift him up. Peeking from our cell, I see him fitting him with a combat vest and giving him a hug. That's it. He goes up. Followed by the Mask. I never see them again. It's a shame they're both gone. They weren't exactly saints, of course, but compared to the others, they had some humanity. Some fondness for me. We'd had a close bond since those early days in captivity.

The Mask and the Cleaner are soon replaced by two others, who descend into the tunnel. One we call "Gray," because of his graying hair. The other we initially call "Junior," because we mistake the beautiful new voice in their prayers as his. Since "Nightingale" is already taken, the name sticks. Later we

realize it was Gray's voice and we need a new name. It isn't hard. The way he treats us, his crude and aggressive manner, and his complete disregard for our basic requests earn him the nickname "Trash." They both join the guard crew.

In June, we receive mattresses, after five and a half months of sleeping on the ground. Occasionally the guards burst into our cell and conduct a search. They demand we strip completely and stand facing the wall with our hands up. They tear through the room, rummage through our belongings, lift the blankets, flip over the mattresses, and dump out our bags while we stand naked and humiliated. We never know exactly what they are looking for. I wonder if maybe other hostages somewhere tried to escape, or managed to harm themselves using something they found, and they want to make sure we don't have anything to do that with. Or maybe it's just about humiliating us.

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Our captors tell us they plan to film a video, like they did back in the house and the last tunnel. This time, only Or will be filmed. They say he looks the skinniest, so it's best for him to appear on-screen. Two days before the shoot, they ask him to write down what he wants to say. The four of us huddle to brainstorm what to say, and how. Of course, our captors demand that Or make an appeal to the Israeli government, that he should say we're not eating because of the bombings, that he should point out how thin he is, that he should beg the Israeli public to get us out of here already, that the war should end.

After two days of preparations, our captors go over the script we wrote for Or and fine-tune the messages they want: pressure the government, call on it to end the war. They take Or to their chamber, to film him there. We stay behind in our cell but hear everything. They film him at least four times until

they get the result they want. Or's words—really, our words—are scripted. Much of the text is just to satisfy our captors. But within those words, there's a real cry for help. An appeal for the outside world: *Don't forsake us.* A desperate hope that maybe his words will make a difference, a deep yearning for that moment we are all waiting for: freedom.

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In July, our captors call us over. They inform us that because Israel's national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, said that Palestinian prisoners would get only one meal a day, we're also going to receive only one meal a day. In recent months, our captors also used to bring us tea, sometimes hot, sometimes not. But now, they tell us, that's over too. One meal a day, and water. We beg them not to do this, we try to talk them out of it, we try to persuade, to plead. Nothing helps. We're down to one meal a day. And we start to go hungry. Very hungry.

Even before this, we felt hunger. We had two meals a day, but they were meager and modest. Now, with one meal gone, the hunger becomes increasingly intense. As the days go by, we begin to notice malnutrition taking its toll. Looking at each other, we start to see the extreme thinness, the gaunt faces, the flesh wasting away. I feel my body weakening, sense the dizziness, see my belly caving inward. The single meal we get each day has no set time. One day it might come at 13:00, the next day suddenly at 15:00, another day at noon. We live with zero certainty as to when the next meal will arrive. The meal consists of either one and a half dry pitas per person, or a tray of flavorless pasta, or a tray of rice. Besides the pita rations, sometimes we also get a can of cheese or fava beans. We prefer the pita, because then we can save

a piece for the evening, at least to eat something before sleeping. It helps to calm the stomach.

We find ways to distract ourselves from the hunger. To pass the time in our cell, to distract ourselves from the distress and the pain. We have a book that reached us via Hersh and Ori Danino back in the previous tunnel. *Shadow and Bone* by Leigh Bardugo. We learn from Alon that the author is Jewish. We pass the book around between us. I'm shortsighted, so I can't read it. But Or and Alon devour it again and again. Elia knows very little English and struggles to read it, so he doesn't. But as time drags on and boredom mounts, he decides to try. He picks it up and starts reading. At first, he stops after every other word to ask us what it means. Then once per sentence. Then every other sentence. Then once per page. Slowly, he teaches himself English just to read the book.

They obsess about this book. Something about it, besides being a way to pass the time, gives them strength. They tell me that the protagonist learns to navigate her way through the darkness. And that although fictional, and the book itself a fantasy, her character holds lessons about surviving in the dark. About captivity. They take turns reading it over and over. Alon, then Or, then Elia, then back to Or, back to Alon. I ask Alon to read it aloud to me, but after a page and a half, I get bored and ask him to stop. I guess it's different when someone else reads to you. Or, Elia, and Alon say that once they're out, they'll write to Leigh Bardugo and tell her how much her book meant to them. At some point, after they've each read it several times, the three tire of the book and pluck up the courage to ask our captors for another one. They laugh in our faces.

Starvation consumes us, pulling us inward. Everything becomes harder. We're harder on each other, harder on ourselves. Food distribution becomes a point of conflict again—arguments, yelling, frustration. The hunger fills our

thoughts. Our minds. All I want is to eat something. All I can think about is that slice of pita I saved for the evening and whether tomorrow we'll get another one or just a tray of tasteless pasta from which we can't save anything for later.

We repeat the dates to ourselves daily, so we won't lose track of time. So we won't forget. We say to each other, *today is Tuesday, the whateverth of whatever month*. Or, *today is Thursday, the somethingth of something*. Today is day 200 in captivity. Then 201. Then 202. Then 300. And so on. We've lost track of the Hebrew dates. But we guess the holidays. In April, we assume it's Passover time. In early May, we assume it's Memorial Day and Independence Day. Around these assumed Jewish holidays, we share memories, mostly about food. We tell each other what we usually eat at home. I reminisce about family holidays, the feeling on the kibbutz, our Independence Day celebrations, the big Shavuot festivities. One day in April, our captors bring us sweets. We think it's for Passover. But they gleefully tell us Iran launched a massive missile at Israel. "*Halwan li Iran! Halwan li Iran!*" they sing. *Sweets for Iran!* We still don't know what's true and what's not. Again, their joy is our pain.

–

"What were your plans for this year?" I ask Alon one evening, as we both try to take our minds off the gnawing hunger. "After you got back from your worldwide tour, what were you planning?"

Alon chuckles. "I was supposed to move to Tel Aviv with three friends," he says. "Everything was set. On October 8, we were meant to give the checks to the landlady." He goes quiet and peers around. "This ain't Tel Aviv," he whispers.

I look at him.

"What about college?" I ask.

"Dunno yet," Alon says.

"What do you like?" I ask him. "What interests you?"

"Music," he says. "I love to play, it makes me feel good. It's a big part of my life."

"Have you thought about studying music?"

"I don't know … maybe. I feel like I should study engineering. It's a 'real' profession."

"But is that what you want to do?"

"You can't make a living from music."

"That's not what I asked."

Alon shrugs. "Don't you think I'm better off with engineering than music?"

"I think it's important to do what you love," I say. "To wake up in the morning excited to go to work. You can't just go become an engineer because it pays better. You've got to want it, to love it. And if you don't, then maybe it's not the right path."

Alon is silent. Then he sighs and says, "My dad's an engineer."

When he mentions his dad, his eyes well up. Like every time he brings up his parents or family. The longing washes over him. Sometimes he just tears up; other times he cries openly, as if drowning in a sea of despair and pain. I hug him and tell him, again and again, that it's OK to cry, but he mustn't give up hope. That he has to be strong for the people he loves in the outside world. That he doesn't have the luxury of giving up. That we're in this together. He's not alone. *We're all going to make it out of here.* I remind him that he is capable, even if he doesn't feel that way. He is strong. He can survive.

Again, I feel paternal toward Alon. I feel a responsibility to remind him of the power he holds inside. To give him the tools he needs: self-confidence,

the ability to focus on the mission of survival, to stay strong on his own.

–

The hunger gets worse. One quiet evening, the four of us sit and decide we have to do something. We need to take action, anything to convince them to feed us more. After throwing around several ideas, I suggest pretending to faint.

"What do you mean?" Or asks.

"I'll pretend to pass out," I explain. "That'll scare them. They'll realize we can't live like this, on just one meager meal a day."

Or, Elia, and Alon look at me. I persuade them it's a good idea, and that it should be me, since I'm the oldest. They understand, and we start planning. We know we'll only get one shot, so it has to be perfect.

"I can't just faint," I tell them. "It needs to be more extreme. If I just pass out, they'll lift my legs, splash water on me, and move on. We need an injury, something dramatic."

We decide to fake a full fall that leaves me bleeding. We need blood.

Like directors preparing a movie shoot, we plan every detail. Who'll say what, what they'll shout, where I'll collapse. We wait for the guards to rotate duty, reckoning the Triangle is the most sympathetic. When his shift starts, I take the razor blade they gave us to shave every couple of months, bite down on a blanket to stifle my screams, and slice a deep gash into my eyebrow. Then I ask the Triangle to let me out to use the bathroom. He agrees.

I step out into the hallway. He doesn't see me. I start swaying. And then —I collapse onto the floor, eyes closed, pretending to be unconscious.

Elia plays his part and rushes over in panic. "Eli! Eli!" he shouts, lifting my legs. I keep my eyes closed. Alarmed, the Triangle calls the others. When

they run over and see the blood, they panic. Meanwhile, Or and Alon yell from the cell, "What's happening? What happened to Eli?" feigning perfect panic.

The Triangle and Elia lift me up slowly. I open my eyes but keep playing confused and weak. They sit me down. I see the color draining from the Triangle's face and notice the Circle's suspicious glances. He starts grilling us. But we've rehearsed this; we're ready for any scenario. The Triangle orders the Circle to fetch me a bowl of dates to boost my strength. The Circle glares at me but does as he's told. The Triangle stays by my side, monitoring me.

We win a small victory: an extra one and a half pitas per person, in addition to our regular meal.

But when our captors see me regaining strength, everything snaps back.

A week later, we're back to one meal a day.

–

One day, Trash receives a phone call. From his reaction, we gather something happened to his family, that they were injured or had to evacuate. We hear his rage, his curses. He smashes his phone on the ground and storms into our cell. I happen to be lying closest to the door.

Before we can react, he lets loose on me, beating me senseless. Punching me. Kicking me in the ribs. I curl up, screaming in agony, trying to crawl away, my feet still shackled. He keeps kicking me. I drag myself toward Alon, who tries to shield me. Trash lands another kick on me, then turns and kicks Or twice, hard, and storms out.

We hear the Triangle scolding him in the hallway, saying this isn't the way of the Quran, that it's not acceptable.

If this isn't acceptable, then what is? Murdering women and children, that's acceptable? Shooting youngsters in an airless bunker, that's acceptable?

Murdering Almog's girlfriend and then abducting him and tying him, injured, to a bed, that's acceptable? Brutally abducting civilians from their homes and shoving them into a dark tunnel, that's acceptable? Starving us, humiliating us, hiding us away, that's acceptable? Don't you have any red lines? Are there no limits to your malice? Just as long as you're not beating me, everything's fine? Do you think you're angels? Good students of the Quran? Does this make sense in your heads?

But I'm not listening. Not really hearing. I'm drowning in my own rage, degradation, and pain. Everything hurts, especially my ribs. Some are definitely broken. It's hard to breathe. My body starts to shake uncontrollably. I don't understand what's happening. I can't stop it. Alon, Or, and Elia gather around me, trying to help, tending to my wounds, giving me water, trying to calm me. I realize my body is in shock. I try to breathe deeply, to calm myself.

I'm lying on Alon's mattress, the one I managed to crawl to. I can't move. The Triangle comes in, sees me there, and asks me to return to my own mattress. So I crawl back. He gives me a painkiller, which helps a little. A few hours later, the pain intensifies. I ask for another pill. He gives me one.

For a whole month, I can barely get up, sit, stand, or eat. I can't sleep at night because of the pain. Every breath hurts. Every movement. Every touch. Every trip to the bathroom comes at great effort and pain. Most of the time, I just lie curled up on the mattress.

I beg for more painkillers. Our captors give me one. Then another. A third. Then nothing. No more. Without the pills, I can't get through the night. When they refuse, despite my pleas, Alon gives me one of his. He had saved it from the time he had an ear infection. Just paracetamol. That pill saves me. It helps me survive one more night.

Lying there, aching on the mattress, I dream. I hallucinate. And suddenly, I remember Friday, October 6. The day before it all happened. The day before

armed terrorists burst into my home, into my life, and kidnapped me here.

It was one of those Fridays we'd made into a tradition. I have a group of friends in the kibbutz—we've been buddies for years—and every few months, we gather for an afternoon barbecue, just us guys, to drink beer, gossip about kibbutz life, share stories, laugh, and sink into deep conversation. On Friday, October 6, 2023, we met up in my backyard.

Everyone came. My brother Yossi, Avida Bachar, Niv, and other close friends. We were all calm, happy, carefree. The air was clean and fresh. The smoke from the grill carried the smell of fine meat. I can still smell it even now. The beers were cold. The smiles were many. The fields stretched out far in the distance. Nothing to cloud our joy. Nothing cast a shadow. Nothing to ruffle our peace.

After everyone left, we cleaned up the yard and tidied the house. The sun set, evening came, and we sat for our Friday night dinner—me, Lianne, and the girls. I try to remember what we talked about. Nothing comes to mind. Maybe because it was so ordinary, so simple, so deeply familiar. Just the four of us around the table. Eating. Talking. Laughing. Then we cleared the dishes, watched some TV, and went to sleep.

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In all the hard moments—the fights, hunger, humiliating searches, and conflicts between us—we try to create moments of strength. Moments of togetherness.

Many of our shared moments revolve around tradition and faith. I'm not religious, but I'm no stranger to Jewish tradition. I come from a traditional family. I spent many hours in my childhood in a synagogue on Shabbat and Jewish holidays. I make Kiddush with Lianne and the girls every Friday night.

And even though I lead a very secular life, and I'm perfectly happy with that life, these traditional spaces give me strength. They give me fulfillment.

Even in the early days of captivity, I find myself murmuring Shema Yisrael again and again, almost unconsciously. Like a mantra to keep me grounded. Every morning, Elia recites the traditional Jewish morning prayers out loud. He grew up religious and knows them by heart. He recites the prayers, and we stand and answer, "Amen." That's how we start every day.

And every Friday night, we do Kiddush. No matter what we've been through during the week, what fights we did or didn't have, whatever our frustration or sorrow or pains, we gather in silence. The four of us. We listen to Elia, holding a cup of water in both hands, reading in a trembling, quiet voice:

> *Yom hashishi vayechulu hashamayim vehaaretz vekhol tzeva'am* …
>
> *The sixth day, and the heavens and the earth and all that filled them were complete* …

Before Kiddush, I sing "Eshet Chayil," a traditional hymn from Proverbs. "She is good to him, never bad, all the days of her life. She looks for wool and flax, and sets her hand to them with a will …" I sing with my eyes closed, thinking about the women in my life: my mom, my sisters, Lianne, Noiya and Yahel. Elia doesn't know the song. I teach him the words every Friday, till he starts joining me and we sing together.

Then we break the bread, or rather, a slice of pita we've saved especially for the Hamotzi blessing. Like on Jewish holidays, when we share memories with each other, every Shabbat we tell stories. We each share what Shabbat was like at home—the foods we cooked or ate, the customs we observed.

On Saturday nights, when the Jewish Sabbath ends, Elia chants the *zemirot*, the traditional table hymns. Sometimes we join him. Songs I remember

my father singing. And that memory comes as a pinch of sweetness.

I don't know if I feel God in those moments. But I feel power. I feel a connection. To my people. To our tradition. To my identity. It connects me to my family. To my childhood. To my roots. It reminds me *why* I must survive. *Who* I'm surviving for. *What* I'm surviving for. It brings back glowing memories of childhood. Of my father. Of my mother. Of a white tallit during Shabbat prayers. Wine in a goblet. Candles on the windowsill. Opening the ark. Torah scrolls. A cantor singing. A white tablecloth spread over a table overflowing with good food. Everything that feels so far from here.

And it brings to life the whole cast of characters waiting for me. Mom. My siblings. Lianne. The girls. I imagine returning to all of them. I imagine their hugs. I imagine the souls I love most enveloping me in light, whispering:

Shabbat shalom, Eli. Shabbat shalom.

It's so good to have you home.

8

On September 10, 2024, after eight months in the tunnel, we leave. In the morning, we start to hear our captors packing. We peek into their room and see them filling their bags with canned food, medical equipment, and water bottles. After two hours they enter our cell and order us to pack up too. They don't tell us where we're going, or when, or why. And nobody dares to ask. Even when we manage to talk to them, even in moments of relative openness, when we get information, and things are calm, there are questions we just don't broach. Like these ones. Like "Why are we suddenly leaving?" or "Where are we going?"

We pack up our few belongings into plastic bags and get ready to go. Just like during the last handover, eight months ago, our captors explain that we're about to split into pairs, and each of us will walk with a captor. They stress that we must walk in silence, that we mustn't answer anyone in the street, that we mustn't even look around us, that we're to stick to the captors assigned to us, and that we shouldn't even think of escaping or making a scene, because we'll end up with bullets in our brains. I'm just thinking of the long staircase we had to walk down to get here. My body is still aching from Trash's thrashing. I'm still struggling to breathe. Just the thought of climbing those stairs is daunting.

Ironically, the captor I'm assigned is Trash. He doesn't make eye contact with me. We line up and start walking. After a quiet walk down the dark corridor, we reach the stairs and start climbing, pair by pair. Despite the pain, I manage to climb the tall steps practically without assistance. My body is stronger than I thought. I'm extremely nervous about stepping into the street, emerging into the open. I haven't seen sunlight in eight months. For eight months, not a glimpse of the city or of the war outside. I have no idea what we're about to see and whether our captors will really manage to stand between us and the mob that might clock who we are and try to lynch us. I don't know if there's even a mob outside. Or whether we're going to a better or worse tunnel.

We leave through the house we initially entered from. Outside, it's sunset, a gentle twilight cast across the street. Trash attaches himself to me. Like the other captors, he too is carrying a gun under his clothes. He keeps it concealed, I guess, in order not to arouse suspicion in the street, and to evade Israeli air strikes. When I struggle to keep walking, Trash helps me, giving me a little support and holding the plastic bag with my belongings. I can tell that he too is shaking a little, he too is tense, and he too wants to get this over with. I steal a glimpse left and right and see that the piles of rubble strewn around when we marched here with great difficulty eight months ago are now in an even bigger pile on the side. It looks like they've done some serious infrastructure work here, and now we walk straight down the road. It's not paved, but at least it's clear of concrete and metal debris. Standing on every street corner are two men who silently wave at us. I gather they're Hamas. You can see they're carrying weapons under their clothes, and I realize that this time, our transfer has been carefully planned, with guards along the whole route.

The streets are full of people. Stores are open. Some selling groceries, others meat. I can smell food being cooked, being fried, and I'm desperate for a bite. Everything is so different from the last time we walked down these streets. No deathly silence this time. No sense that a war is raging. No eerie quiet. Now, there is life around us. There's movement. Almost a sense of normalcy.

We walk briskly and in total silence for about fifteen minutes till we reach a big house. We enter. It's dark. Very dark. Trash lifts the rug in the living room, revealing a tunnel shaft. Smiley pops out. I haven't seen him in months and had no idea where he disappeared. I'm happy to see him, because he is one of the kinder captors. I ask him, quietly, where we're going, and he whispers back in Arabic, "*Nahar kadim*." *The previous tunnel.* I understand we're going back to our original tunnel, and the thought is comforting, because I remember the tunnel as tidy and well stocked. But when we go down, walk through the dark corridor, and reach the room I remember, I find the space bare. There are still no mattresses. And this time, our captors use a partition to divide the room in two, restricting us to an even tinier area.

When Elia arrives, he throws himself down and says: "Life's totally normal outside, did you notice?"

"We did," I say.

"I saw kids walking around with iPhones," Elia continues. "I saw people laughing, eating, stores open, like there's no war anymore, like they've forgotten us. Everyone's gone back to normal and we're still stuck here." He pauses for a second, then continues in an anguished voice: "How's it possible that they're living it up, having fun, and we're still here?"

We say nothing. In all these months, our captors repeatedly taunt us that we've been forgotten, that Netanyahu doesn't care about us, that our families have stopped protesting for us, that we've been left behind, that everyone

would rather we drop dead already. They also tell us that Israel is falling apart, that half of its people have already fled the country, that the north has been bombed and conquered, and that soon, *just you wait and see*, there'll be no more Israel.

I take a deep breath and turn to Elia and the others. "Do you really think that? Do you really think they've forgotten us?" Elia stares at me in silence. So do the others. "Really, honestly? I guarantee you, our families are standing at a junction somewhere right now and shouting our names. I guarantee you, nobody's forgotten our faces. And I'm telling you, don't let yourselves get fooled and don't believe their bullshit. In the end, they're all Hamas guys. Remember that. Even when it doesn't look like there's progress, remember there are still people, like the director of Mossad, who go to sleep thinking about us and wake up thinking about us, and we're the only thing they care about, and the only thing on their minds is how to get us out of here."

I pause for a moment and look at them. I don't know if they believe me. I don't know if I believe myself. But I cling to these beliefs, and to these words, because they give me *strength*. Strength to endure. To survive. "Don't break," I tell them in a whisper. "However long it takes, we're getting out of here!"

We adapt to the new tunnel. It's not the same as how we left it. First of all, because of the people here. There are more people here, people we've never met. Not hostages. Hamas. We assume some of them are just sheltering here. Maybe they're on Israel's hit list and fear for their lives. Among all the unfamiliar faces, I notice two older characters who spend most of their time in the captors' quarters and have basically no communication with us. We call one of them "Whitey" because of the color of his hair; the other, "Y.S." because he looks like Yahya Sinwar. Other Hamas operatives also come and go. Sometimes we recognize them, sometimes not. We talk about it among

ourselves and gather that in our monthslong absence, this tunnel became some kind of headquarters.

This time, our toilets are the ones at the far end of the kitchen. To get there, we have to pass through the kitchen, where, most of the day, the Hamas operatives are eating, talking, laughing. They don't like it when we walk past. It bugs them. So it encourages them to torture us with a whole new humiliation technique: waiting for the toilet. We can stand at the edge of our small cell, ask to go and pee, like schoolboys begging the teacher to let them go, and wait. Then they don't let us go. This can go on for ten minutes, fifteen minutes, half an hour. Sometimes even an hour. An hour of standing in pain and waiting. Every little request to pee becomes a chance to torture us, and they revel in it. It also lets them chill out in the kitchen without having scrawny, skinny Israeli hostages scuttling in front of their eyes.

I tell Alon, because I know what he's like and know he'll find this especially difficult, "Get ready, Alon. Take a deep breath. We've got some difficult months ahead. The Jewish holidays, October 7 … They won't let it pass without doing something against Israel, and anything they do against Israel will get everyone here excited. Take a deep breath, and it'll pass."

Indeed, we have no idea what's really happening outside, but throughout September and early October, our captors and all the other Hamas guys in the tunnel keep whooping. Every "*Allahu Akhbar!*" is emotionally crushing, because it means something bad is happening outside. Every platter of sweets they pass around scares us, making us think, *Who got hurt this time? What's happening? To whom? What about the north? What about the south?*

October 1 and 2 are especially difficult. Our captors and everyone else in this tunnel (besides us) are in ecstasy. We don't know why, but clearly something bad is happening to our side. Just thinking about it makes us anxious and sad. The struggle against despair, against reaching our breaking

point, is even harder on days like these. Every moment like this takes us backward, to feelings and memories from October 7. It makes us think, even for a moment, that they're beating us. That it's a lost cause. That nobody will ever come to save us.

We hear them celebrating how they're getting help from every direction. The Houthis are chipping in, Hezbollah is sending support, the Iranians are intervening. But in our analysis, whispering to each other in our tiny cell, we reckon that maybe Hamas is getting all this help because it's a spent force.

October 7 comes around again and reinforces our theory. We feel mostly apprehensive and fearful about the anniversary. What will they do? What will it look like? The day itself goes by peacefully, without much rejoicing, without dessert platters or cries of "*Allahu Akbar!*" or celebratory prayers. That strengthens our assessment that Hamas is not the force it used to be, that it doesn't have enough resources and forces to pull off a successful attack. That it has been substantially weakened.

Day by day, we also sense their desperation and exhaustion. There are nights when I hear crying. Not from us. From them. They sob into their mattresses. At first, I think I'm imagining it, but I keep hearing the same sound, over and over again, until I clock what's happening. I realize they're totally spent, sapped, fatigued. Their deepening despair brings us no joy. Obviously, we're pleased that, as far as we can make out, they're getting pummeled. Obviously, we're pleased that every night they get a report with the number of *shaheeds* killed that day. But there is also something scary in their despair. Because a desperate hostage taker, a desperate terrorist, has nothing to lose. And we're afraid that one of them, out of frustration or sadness or tiredness or rage, might just get up and shoot us all. As their captives, we're better off with them hopeful.

Every once in a while, one of our captors tells us, "We're just like you. We're also having a tough time. We're also hungry." Usually, we nod and bite our tongues, stifling our laughter and swallowing our bitterness deep inside, but once, I snap. I decide I'm answering back and say: "Just like us? What do you mean, like us? Do you eat like us? Are you cut off from your families like us? You can eat whatever you want, whenever you want it. You can call your wives, your kids, whenever you want. You're free. Free. Like us? Really?"

For the first time, we see UN aid boxes. Big white crates brimming with food. Our captors eat and are merry, leaving us with a few miserable crumbs from the whole feast, but hey, we're still happy these boxes are here. First of all, it's good that there's food. When there's food, there's something to ask for, something to beg for, and you might even get something. And when our captors have food, when they feel full, they are more satisfied and less disgruntled, and that makes them more amicable and less irritable. So supplies are a good thing.

We have honed our survival skills, and we use them to map out the various characters in our tunnel. We work out who's softer, who's tougher. Whom to ask for food, whom not to approach for anything. Like in the previous tunnels, we notice that when they're together, they become meaner and humiliate us more. When they're alone, they become a bit softer. Not everyone, though. The younger captors and terrorists are stricter and their treatment of us is harsher and more degrading. But on good days, the Triangle and the Square can suddenly chuck us a slice of pita or fruit, without the others noticing. We study their shifts, learn to sniff out their mood, the times when we're better off asking for something and the times when there is no point trying. Like hungry street cats, we keep watch on them from our cell. Using whomever we need to use to get a wedge of clementine, a single popcorn, a teensy piece of halva.

We have already spent so long together. It has been a year. We know each other well by now. We have already opened up and talked about everything. When it seems like there isn't a morsel of information we haven't shared, consumed by hunger and homesickness, we share long silences instead. Our empathy for each other shrivels up. We struggle to muster patience for each other's behavior, to pay any attention or interest, or even want to understand.

Sometimes I look at my three fellow hostages. I feel like I know them, and everything about them. I know, for example, that Elia grew up in Bet Shemesh, and that his family now lives in Tzur Hadassah in the Jerusalem hills while he has been living in Tel Aviv for the last few years. I know that since he was a little boy, he has been highly independent; that at a very young age, he flunked out of formal education and started making his own way in the world; that his survival skills are sharp. I see him growing up in the darkness of captivity, learning to share, teaching himself English. I see his mind opening up as he comes face-to-face with the unfamiliar; I see him developing impressive skills to manage interpersonal conflicts. I remember our conversations at the beginning. He heard me talking about my economics degree and management jobs and said he couldn't understand why anyone would go to college and what it gets you in life. And now, all of a sudden, he's in a different place. He has dreams of studying. He has a will to succeed. A fervent belief in good. And all of this is happening here, in these foul and gloomy tunnels.

I also know that Or lives with his wife, Einav, and their two-year-old son, Almog, in the Tel Aviv suburb of Giv'atayim. I know that they were both born in Rishon LeZion and were close friends for many years until they realized they were something more. I know that they are happy together and have a precious friendship circle, that Or is a successful high-tech professional, and

that he is homesick and worried sick for his wife and infant son. That he is desperate to hug them again.

I know that Alon grew up in Lavon, in the Galilee. That he is the eldest son and eldest grandson, that everyone is proud of him, and that he is a good boy with a childish faith in human beings. I see him too, changing in front of my eyes. Grudgingly discovering his own rough edges, a certain brazenness, an ability to stand up for himself. Learning to say what he feels, even if it hurts. I know that Alon is suffering from nightmares. At first, they were frequent, and although they are less common now, they still torment him at night. It's through him that I come face-to-face with the whole concept of nightmares.

"I'm scared I'm going to be left here alone," Alon tells me. "You know you'll get out before me, Eli, because you're older, and I'll be stuck here without you."

I place a palm on his shoulder. "You won't be alone," I tell him, "because even if I get released first, you'll still have the strength you've built up. You already know, you've got this. One month, then another, then another, winter, spring, summer, and now fall again, and you're still alive. Look at you, you're a survivor! Look how big you are!" Alon says nothing. I know he's still terrified.

I want to give him skills to serve him in life. I'm always thinking of what to tell him to boost his self-confidence, to make him realize he's got this. What to tell him to make him realize that he's giving *me* strength too. That his concern for me, his care, and even the way he treats me as a father figure gives me more strength than I had before.

In our darker moments, we revert to the stories we have already told each other. Alon tells me about his travels, his friends from the Galilee, his dreams. I tell him about Lianne. As if he's never heard the story before, I tell him how we met. "It was 1995, the year after I got out of the army. That was the year I took up diving. I did a course, then in April I went to the Sinai with my old

buddy and schoolfriend Avida Bachar. We spent ten days there, diving the whole time, and when we got back to the kibbutz—that's when I met Lianne."

"Just like that, in the street?" Alon asks.

"No, we met in the pub."

Alon chuckles. "Like in olden days."

I smile. "Yeah, I'm from the olden days."

We share a laugh.

"Lianne came to the kibbutz as a volunteer," I tell him. "From England. It was still a big thing back then, people from abroad coming to volunteer on the kibbutz. They put them to work in all sorts of places, and we'd meet them at the pool, playing football, in the cafeteria. And then, one day, after we got back from the Sinai, one of the volunteers who already knew me came up to me and said, listen, there's this girl from England who's got a crush on you. I told him, OK, tell her to come to the kibbutz pub on Friday and we'll meet up."

I pause briefly. We can hear our captors and all the other Hamas operatives in the tunnel performing their prayers. It's not the first time we hear the sound of stifled sobbing coming from one of them. The sound of despair, or pain, who knows? And who cares? I continue. "So it's Friday night," I tell Alon. "I'm in the pub, they point her out, and I walk over, totally casual. We start chatting, the conversation flows, and the rest is history," I conclude with a grin.

Alon lies back on his mattress and falls asleep. Or maybe he only closes his eyes. I take a deep breath. I remember Lianne, how quickly we clicked, our best days together, her decision to stay on the kibbutz and build her life here. I remember meeting her parents, my first flight with her to visit them in England, the first Christmas I ever celebrated, all the hues of red and gold and green, in that strange and distant land. I remember our wedding, one over

there in England, a low-key event for the formality, and one back here in Israel, on the kibbutz, next to the pool, a big, noisy party with so many people, so many friends, so many relatives, all rejoicing and dancing. It was such an amazing wedding, and at the end—tradition is tradition on the kibbutz, after all—we all jumped into the pool and screamed our lungs out with love and joy.

Lianne and I have conversations together, in my head. I promise her that I'm getting out of here alive, that I'll take her and the girls and we'll start over in England. I'll work remotely. And if I can't work remotely, I'll find some menial job. I'll work as a porter. I'll work at a grocery store. I'll take whatever job I can find, just as long as my girls can live free of this fear, this pain, this terror. Just as long as I never have to see those eyes frozen in horror again.

Maybe it's the sudden presence of more Hamas operatives in the tunnel, or maybe it's the passage of time and their fatigue and impatience, or their boredom and villainy, but either way, they mistreat us even more in this tunnel.

They subject us to searches, like in the tunnel, but here, they get worse. We have spot raids, when they order us to strip bare and flip all our belongings over. There's the torturous wait for the toilet. And sometimes, they simply open the bathroom door for no reason. They open it, laugh, say something, and move on. They insist on performing their calls to prayer, the *muezzin*, at the entrance to our cell, on purpose. They subject us to nonstop psychological terror. To try to make us despair, to believe that we've truly been abandoned and no one cares we exist anymore. And then, they exploit our hunger. Just asking for food is degrading. It's so lowly, so beggarly, so miserable. They also revel in offering us a slice of pita or halva or some other sweet, then telling us: we'll give you the pita, but only if you recite these verses from the Quran. Or: we'll give you this halva, but only if you say you believe in the Prophet Muhammad.

Just embrace Islam, and here's a slice of fruit.

I refuse to play this game. I refuse to play into their hands. I really want to eat. I crave food. My body really needs every piece of pita, every slice of fruit. But I refuse to dance to their tune. In order not to annoy them or offend their sense of honor, which they care about deeply, I tell them, every time, that I'm not religious. That I'm just not a religious kind of guy. So they won't think I've got anything against Islam. I'm just not a believer, that's all.

Sometimes, when one of us goes to the bathroom and passes through the kitchen, one of them can offer something to eat. At times, they humiliate us along the way. They might offer us food, on condition that we sit and recite the Quranic verses they want us to say. That sparks an argument between us. Should we refuse to take their food if they don't offer enough to share with the others? Or should we just eat, whenever we can? Whatever they offer. On the one hand, deciding not to take their food if there isn't enough for everyone is a statement of independence. It gives us power against them. And it gives us hope, to get enough food for everyone. On the other hand, agreeing to take their food, whenever we can, whatever the conditions, serves our most critical impulse: our will to survive. Survival is more important than keeping scores about good behavior. When they give us food together, we share it. But if one of us is able to get his hands on a little something else on the side, why push back?

What's the right thing to do? We don't know. We fumble around for an answer. Our captors have their own rules and routines, but they are still human beings, for better or worse, and they can be unpredictable. I have no idea whether I'm right to tell them, "Either it's for all of us, or not at all!" The choice might condemn us to hunger. Maybe we should just decide, *screw it*: if they offer someone something to eat, just take it. Do whatever you can to survive.

"Our lives are all important," say those who think it's a mistake to turn down food unless there's enough for all of us. "And to survive, each of us has got to take care of his own body and seize any opportunity he can take for more food. We don't think we should create that kind of commitment to each other and become dependent. We're in favor of eating whenever you get the chance."

One day, Alon goes to the toilet and we hear one of the captors offering him a piece of fruit. "*Shukran*," says Alon, "but if it's not for everyone, then I'll pass, thank you very much."

"Bravo!" his captor says. Elia, Or, and I stare at each other. Something about that "Bravo!" ends the debate. From that moment on, we follow his lead, despite the hunger and the temptation. Whenever they offer us something to eat, separately, we turn it down. "Thank you very much," we say, "but if it's not for everyone, then no."

We're so hungry. All the time. My body is wasting away. We're all wasting away. We see it happening to each other. The iron shackles permanently fastened to our legs become looser. The flesh that used to press against them starts slowly disappearing. It's alarming. Alon starts losing more toenails, which makes our captors freak out, and they start giving him vitamins and a cream for the fungi spreading across his body.

We beg for more food, warn them we'll all die here, we'll get sick. They really don't want us to get sick. The Triangle asks Peaky to call "the Doctor" to check us. The Doctor is one of the captors we encountered in the last tunnel. He is part of their crew but seems to have some medical training.

One day, the Doctor shows up. He enters our cell with Peaky and the Triangle. Peaky orders us to stand and remove our shirts. He points at me and Elia and tells the Doctor, "Look at them, they're not even thin, they look better than me, they're eating great!" We stare at him. I'm cursing him inside

my head but don't dare utter a word. Peaky points at Or. "He does look a little skinny, but the rest look great." The Doctor says nothing. He eyes us, nods, and leaves.

We hear Peaky warn the Triangle, "Nobody give them any more food! They're not going to die and they're not sick. Don't let them tell you sob stories, they look great, they're eating just like us." We can't see the Triangle, but we assume he's nodding and will follow Peaky's orders. Now it's even harder to get our hands on any food outside of mealtimes. Even the little top-ups that they used to sneak us, especially from the Triangle and the Square, end.

They are all scared of Peaky.

Hunger continues to gnaw at us. To consume our bodies and souls. To devour who we are. To exhaust us. Starvation threatens to condemn us to darkness. I refuse to submit to the darkness. "Starved or injured or sick or tired," I whisper to Elia, Or, and Alon, "whatever it is, we're getting outta here."

Even in these excruciating times, we have a fixed ritual at the end of every day, which we refuse to skip. The four of us sit and try to think of something good that happened to us that day. Whatever day we just had. I came up with it spontaneously one evening, to lift everyone's spirits. I told them, "Come on, let's think of something good that happened today, just one thing." They went along with me, and it became a habit. At first, we rack our brains to think of one good thing. Then, as time goes by, we challenge ourselves to come up with three. Sometimes it's really hard, and sometimes it's easy to find three and we even continue to four or five. There are days when we even manage to find ten good things! One good thing might be, for example, if they suddenly let us drink tea. Or if the tea was sweet. Another good thing might be if a particularly cruel guard we dislike doesn't show up

that day. Or if the day went by without any humiliations. Or if we got a small piece of fruit from one of our captors. Slowly, this routine begins to affect our whole day. We find ourselves searching for the good things for which we can express gratitude in the evening.

Hope is never something that comes easily. It's always something you've got to fight for, to work on. Like Kiddush every Friday night, like Elia's Havdalah songs at the end of every Sabbath, like the prayers that open every morning, this circle of thanksgiving is something that we stick to, cling to, cleave to. To search for something good. To stay optimistic. To win.

9

I don't know who started the nicknames for the terrorists around us. I think it was Or and Elia, right at the beginning, when we suddenly found ourselves all in the tunnel with so many captors around us, and we started naming them.

We've got the Mask and the Cleaner, aka Sa'id and Sa'ad, who were with us from the house at the beginning, descended into the tunnel with us in November, and then were sent up into battle a few months later, scared and sobbing, and never came back. We nicknamed Sa'id "the Mask" because he was the only one in the early days in the tunnel who always wore a face covering, to hide his identity. He must have thought that it would all be over quickly and didn't bank on the long ride. Within a few weeks, he gave up and removed his mask but the nickname stuck. Sa'ad got nicknamed "the Cleaner" because—you guessed it!—he spent all his time cleaning. The captors' quarters, their kitchen, their toilets.

The Cleaner and the Mask were all right with us, all in all. I keep thinking that if the Mask, Sa'id, had been born in Jaffa and grown up near me, we could have been good friends in another life. Under his terrorist exterior, there is still a calm and mild-mannered human being. In our interactions, I begin to understand the depth of his ignorance and how badly he has been brainwashed. They're absolutely certain that Israelis only want to kill them and dream of doing evil. Most critically, I understand that he and his ilk are not

such great idealists as they try to make out. They weren't just searching for meaning and stumbled on terrorism. They flocked after Hamas and chose to be terrorists for economic reasons. They understood where the money was and where power lay, and they followed it. That much, I understand from speaking with them, and especially with the Circle.

I believe them, but only to a point. The terrorists who broke into my home in Be'eri were not just looking to make ends meet. They were medieval barbarians, whose hatred for Jews and Israel trumped their love of life itself. I can't think of any parallel to the depth of their hatred and willingness to perpetrate atrocities in the name of an ideology. It's the kind of low point of humanity you read about only in books. I get the sense that our captors might be trying to win me over, to explain why they're even there. The fact we're talking while they're holding four innocent people in a tunnel, starving and abusing them, must strike them as totally normal. I mean, who hasn't tried to top up his income and found himself holding starving hostages in a dungeon somewhere?

After the Cleaner and the Mask, we meet the Triangle: the direct commander of the force holding us. The Triangle is one rank under Peaky and got this nickname because something about him reminded Or and Elia of the cartoon character Patrick from *SpongeBob*. I'm not familiar with him, but that's what they claim. The Triangle has been with us since our earliest days in the tunnel. He is there all the time. Ever present. The Triangle is responsible for the whole squad, for us, for the food, and for day-to-day life underground.

The Triangle is a fifty-something-year-old, strong-looking, tall, and broad mountain of a man. He's often the one who stops the other captors from losing their shit or acting on sudden bursts of cruelty, and I get the sense that he sees himself as a professional. Whenever he is around, the situation seems under control. Even when the situation is dire, which it usually is, it's under

control, and nobody is suddenly going to go off the rails. But the Triangle is still a disciplined Hamas officer, who can be cruel and severe when he wants to be. If he receives an order, like for example not giving us even a small extra helping, he will fulfill it to the letter, because an order is an order. When the Triangle makes us food, it always comes out tasty. He's an excellent cook, given the conditions in the tunnels, and compared to the others. So whenever there is food to cook, it's often his job to serve it up. Our other captors call him "the Chef."

There are moments he opens up to us, and I learn that he has eight children and that in his "real life," before the war, he was a Hamas police officer. He didn't just stumble into this position when the war broke out. He's a Hamas career man. He is more restrained than the others. It's hard to know what he's feeling, what's going through his mind, or even what's happening outside. The best indicator of his mood is how tightly he fastens our leg cuffs. Once every two months, when they let us wash with a bucket, he's the one who chains us back up. If he fastens the chains angrily and tightly, we know something bad is happening. Either to him, or just in general, in the outside world.

The Circle is the Triangle's partner in crime. They both held Ori Danino and Hersh Goldberg-Polin in a house aboveground, before they were taken into the tunnels. Early on, Ori and Hersh warned us about the Circle. *He's a dictator*, they said. It doesn't take us long to understand what they meant. He's like a petty drill sergeant, a control freak who needs to know everything, who panics if a single piece of information passes behind his back.

The Circle gets his name because of his circular shape, both body and head. Like the Triangle, he too is a very strong man, who also looks around fifty years old. For the first few months, we barely have any interaction with the Triangle; we talk to the Circle. We are the Circle's responsibility, and he is

serious about fulfilling his duty. Being his responsibility means that it's his job to take care of us, of our welfare and needs. And that's exactly what he does. He helps us and brings us what we need. But eventually, something happens to him. He gets worn down and exhausted, and we gather that the nightly "martyr report" has broken him. Over time, he becomes more religious and more extreme. He starts growing out his beard and lashing out at his fellow captors.

At a certain point, after taking us down to one meal a day, the Circle leaves the second tunnel, where we are being held. We gather from the others that he has been paired up with Peaky. By now, we are happy to see the back of him. Back in the days he still spoke with us, he told us that he had two children and earned a living from his falafel stand. He tries to describe to us the general mood in Gaza, and he talks about it a lot, telling us about the despair in the territory because of the economic situation and lack of any diplomatic horizon. "Only a few thousand people in the whole Gaza Strip are allowed to work in Israel every day," he tells us. "That's nothing. The rest have no income. Their academic studies are worthless. They're drowning in poverty; they don't know what to do with themselves." He explains October 7 in terms of the tough life that Gazans have and claims we don't understand the gaping chasm between us.

"How much does a falafel pita cost in Israel?" he asks us once.

"Twenty shekels, cheapest," I answer.

"I sell a falafel pita for a shekel and a half," he says. "Any more, I'd have no customers." Another time, he tells us, "A monthly wage in Gaza is like a daily wage in Israel." At first, we answer him, we talk, we open it up. But later, we realize there's no point.

One day, the Circle tells Elia, "You need to go back to where your parents came from. Where's your mom from?"

"Iran," Elia replies.

"So go back to Iran," he tells him.

I can't bite my tongue any longer. "For real? Back to Iran?" I snap. "Are you willing to guarantee he can go back to Iran? You think he'll be welcomed there with open arms?" Besides his argument that everything that is happening is because of the economic situation and diplomatic impasse, the Circle regurgitates Hamas's agenda for us. It may not be him, or his sons, or his grandsons, he tells us, but in the end, his great- or great-great-grandchildren will achieve their goal and conquer Palestine. He is patient. Eventually. Believe it.

We meet the Circle again when we return to the first tunnel. He is no longer part of the team guarding us, but unfortunately, because of his character and control-freakery, he keeps sticking his nose in our captors' jobs, and not to our benefit. He delights in joining our ritual humiliation and mistreatment. Like Trash, the Circle also enjoys watching October 7 footage on a loop on his iPad. We know that's what he's watching because we can hear it. The screams and cries leave no room for doubt. The clips invigorate him and fill him with verve and malice. Once, I pluck up the courage to ask the Circle for tea, and he looks at me with loathing and says, "Tea? Tea? Say thank you I haven't killed you. In your dreams, tea." That's the Circle as we know him today. The Circle of the first few months used to go out of his way to make me tea, to check I was OK.

He acts differently around Alon, the only one he still treats with a hint of humanity. So we learn that if we want to ask the Circle for something, we should send Alon to ask him. In general, we ask for food based on the personal connections we've made. We've already got a good routine. If we spot the Circle alone in the kitchen at night, even if it's the middle of the night, whatever the time, Alon will get up as if he is going to the toilet, and on

the way he asks the Circle for a little something to eat. Similarly, if the Square is on duty, I'm the one to make the request, and it's Elia's turn when it's the Triangle.

We learn to strike a balance when asking for food, swallowing our pride and begging but without degrading ourselves. We refuse to debase ourselves or play victim. It's a fine line. When I pass them on the way to the bathroom, I stand upright to project that I'm OK. It not only makes me feel stronger; we also know they respect it more. That playing "woe is me" doesn't impress them. On the contrary.

There's Nightingale, who got his name because of his pure singing voice. Nightingale guarded Almog Sarusi before their descent into the tunnels. He treated Almog just like you'd treat a child, nursing his injuries. Nightingale stays with us just till January 5, 2024. He doesn't join us for the second tunnel. When the mosque above us is bombed, he's the one in the guard post under the shaft who closes the trapdoor before all the bricks and debris cascade inside.

Nightingale is one of the nicer captors. He takes care of us and talks to us. He looks really young. Sometimes we see him pacing up and down the tunnel, maybe for exercise. He tells us that he is twenty-four years old and single, and can't afford to get married. Meaning, he doesn't have the money for the bride price they traditionally pay the bride's family in their culture. His pleasant voice makes it slightly less painful to have to listen to their prayers on an endless loop, five times a day. We haven't seen him since we left the first tunnel. Our hunch is that he joined the fighting and is no longer alive. We don't know.

Smiley is also one of the kinder captors. He's the super-intendent of the first tunnel, in charge of upkeep. He knows the tunnel like the back of his hand and knows his way through its electricity, ventilation, and water systems.

When we leave the first tunnel, Smiley joins us for another month and then leaves; we meet him again only when we return on September 10. Smiley looks like he's in his forties. He gets his nickname because he's always smiling. He is one of the captors who occasionally smuggles us food, a piece of fruit or slice of pita or nibble of dessert. Smiley is also the one who makes the captors' morning coffee.

Unlike the Circle, Smiley's patience doesn't wear thin. But like the others, he changes around his fellow captors. What I mean is this: those who are kind to us are kind only when no one else is watching. Whenever they come in a pack, they turn beastly, trying to outdo each other in cruelty, competing to see who can hate us more, who can treat us worse. If I go to the toilet and see Smiley alone in the kitchen, he'll speak gently. He might even ask how I'm doing. He might say, "Don't worry, there's a deal coming. Everything will be OK, stay strong!" But if I catch him with others around, he will glare at me with fury. If someone shouts at me or mocks me, he maintains a vow of silence.

We know that Smiley has daughters. One day, back in the first tunnel, he offers Alon his daughter's hand in marriage. They call Alon "Ginger," even though his hair isn't ginger at all, but his fair hair—the rest of us have black hair—stands out for them. He is also a genuinely handsome guy. So Smiley tells Alon, "Hey, Ginger, take my daughter, marry her, I'll take care of you, I'll give you five thousand shekels a month." Alon freaks out from the proposal at first, but then he calms down and we laugh it off. Smiley repeats the offer every now and then.

When our situation deteriorates even further, I tell Alon with a smile, "Dude, it's a shame you didn't take up the offer, you'd be eating like normal now."

And then there's Peaky, so nicknamed because he outranks the Triangle: he's the peak of the pyramid. We discover that his real name is Abu Malik. We, of course, are not allowed to call him that. We are instructed to call him, and the rest of them, "Muhammad." Just "Muhammad." They try to conceal their real names from us, but after so many months together, these things are hard to hide.

We hardly see Peaky in the first tunnel. We mostly hear his voice, speaking with our captors over the phone. After we escape the bombing of the mosque and are smuggled to the second tunnel, we encounter him more often. Peaky, who looks around forty years old, spends all day on the phone, and from what it seems, is busy transmitting orders to other squads elsewhere.

Given his senior rank, we expected Peaky to be more self-controlled, more professional. But Peaky turns out to be even more beastly than the rest. When they humiliate us, he gives them his blessing and cackles. When I develop a terrible pain in my eyes and ask my captors for eye drops, Peaky marches into our cell. "Who here asked for eye drops?" he asks. I am sure that he is going to hand me a bottle, so I answer immediately, "Me." He looks at me, walks over, and says, "Eye drops, huh? Please, God, may your eyes be so sickly you'll go blind and won't see a thing." That's what he says, and he leaves.

There are also times when he punishes us by postponing our meals. Once, when they suspect one of us peeked into the kitchen, Peaky declares: "No food for you today!" In the end, after a seven-hour delay, he lets our captors feed us.

At first, Peaky is paired up with the Orange. Unsurprisingly, the Orange gets his name because of his orangey hair, making him the odd one out among our captors. The Orange looks around thirty years old. He is especially brutal to us at first, whenever he appears in the first tunnel. He shouts at us. He curses us. But afterward, in the second tunnel, when he becomes a full

member of our band of captors, he takes better care of us and we even forge a genuine relationship. Once, when we sit down to talk, I mention as an aside that I can't bear to smell myself anymore, and my shirt reeks. In a heartbeat, the Orange tells me to give him my shirt and returns it to me after handwashing it himself. Or, Elia, and Alon stare at me and can't believe he just did that for me. I don't know what made us click. At first, I was the only Arabic speaker, so naturally I became our spokesman, our liaison, and the only hostage they could actually talk to, just casually, about their lives. But over time, the others have also picked up some Arabic, so I can't really say what the Orange saw in me specifically.

At a certain point, the Orange gets sent up to fight and disappears. We hear from the others that he was injured. And from the way they scramble to tell Peaky, we realize the two are connected, probably by blood. I thought we'd never see him again, but near the end of January 2025, after months apart, I see him again. And we're both happy, genuinely happy, to be reunited. He shows me the shrapnel in his arms but says nothing about how he got it. I pretend to empathize. As before, I try to ignore the double game between us and what's happening under the surface—me, a man brutally torn from his life, and him, complicit in the crime of my kidnapping. My feelings may be real, but they don't for a second obscure the true nature of our roles here. If it came down to it, each of us would be capable of eliminating the other. Without a moment's pause, without regret. But for now, I set this truth aside.

Eyebrow joins us in the second tunnel. Like I said, he gets his nickname from his unibrow. He looks much older than the others. From his stories, we know that he used to work in construction in Israel. He even knows a little Hebrew. Eyebrow is neither particularly stable nor especially bright. In time, we realize that he is genuinely psychologically disturbed. There are days when he just lies in bed crying, refusing to eat or drink. This happens especially

during our months in the first tunnel, where he also suffers a major panic attack. It unsettles the other captors, and the Doctor and the Triangle try to treat him with medication, hoping to calm him down.

Trash shows up in the second tunnel a little before Eyebrow. He's relatively young, well-built, and strong. In time, we learn he has a son and a daughter. He gets his name because it becomes blindingly clear, early on, that he's especially cruel, never missing an opportunity to open his filthy mouth at us or make cutthroat gestures in our direction. He is not one of the captors we can ask for anything. Not for anything we're missing, and definitely not for extra food. Despite his youth, he is no fool. He's a skilled manager, leader, and commander. From the number and nature of the phone calls he makes, it seems he holds some kind of central logistics role. Trash is the one who beats me up in the second tunnel. He stays with us the whole time.

When we return to the first tunnel, Trash becomes something like Peaky's deputy or right-hand man, which removes him from interacting with us, to our relief. In contrast to his cruelty toward us, when he talks on the phone with his kids, suddenly a different side of him emerges—soft, attentive, and sensitive.

We overhear their phone calls nearly all the time. My hearing is weak, but my Arabic is strong, and I manage to pick up much of the content. I hear how even the cruelest, meanest captors speak affectionately with their own children. I hear how they try to lift their spirits and beseech them to have faith. I hear how even on the days when there is no good news from the ceasefire talks, and definitely no Israeli surrender on the horizon, they tell their families that victory is near, so just hold strong, it's all right, they're making impressive headway.

Besides Trash, there is also Garbage, who joins the terrorists' squad when we return to the first tunnel. Since he's especially violent and cruel and takes pleasure in humiliating us—and since "Trash" is already taken—he becomes

"Garbage." One day, as I pass him on the way to the toilet, he calls me "piggy" and bursts out laughing, until the Square shuts him up. "Eli's no piggy," he rebukes him. Fortunately, after a few months with us, Garbage leaves, becoming another of the "good things" we give thanks for in our nightly circle. First: "Good that Garbage hasn't been here in a week." Then: "Two weeks." Then, "in a month." And finally: "Good riddance, we've seen the last of him."

The Square joins the team around June. We assume he's an officer: the others treat him with greater reverence. He is very tall, and we call him "the Square" even though there's nothing square about him. It's just that we've run out of names. If we already have a Triangle and a Circle, why not a Square?

The Square eventually takes command from the Triangle and becomes responsible for our food and other basic needs. Like the Triangle, he's a difficult man, but he projects confidence and the feeling that everything is under control. When he is around, there is no chaos. No hostage or terrorist dares to step out of line. And still, the Square often smuggles us food when no one's watching. Sometimes he tosses a pita over the partition, a real lifeline. Once, he brings us a single bowl of pasta, a meager daily meal for four men, and surreptitiously pulls a slice of pita out of his pocket. Another time, he quietly smuggles us a packet of peanut butter from a UN aid package. (Not that we ever got anything from the UN itself.) These tiny bits of contraband mean the world to us.

We don't know much about the Square's life, but we do know for certain that at one point, he loses someone close to him, because the others open up a mourners' tent for him inside the tunnel and everyone sits around to offer condolences. We don't get to see what goes on inside, of course, but we hear their words of consolation and smell their coffee, tea, and sweets. This lasts two days. We say nothing to him.

These are not the only captors. There is the Electrician, who shows up when we return to the first tunnel. As his nickname suggests, he's in charge of the electrics. He looks younger than the others. At first, we manage to strike up a rapport with him. We manage to sway him and convince him to bring us more food. But soon enough, he falls in line with Trash and Garbage and becomes aggressive and mean.

There's also Tasty, a stocky man who seems to be the superintendent during our second stay in the first tunnel. We call him "Tasty" because his name in Arabic, or at least the name the others use for him, is Abu Zaki, and "Zaki" is Arabic for "tasty." He keeps talking about the cost of living outside, regaling the Square and the Triangle with the prices of basic goods in the markets and stores. He seems to be in charge of food and supplies, because he and the Electrician frequently pop out aboveground, sometimes for one or two whole days. When he is alone, we can ask him for things and he'll pop out to bring them, but when he's together with the others, he becomes haughty and cruel. Like the others.

There is the Doctor—a member of the captors' squad and their in-house medic of sorts. Maybe he's really a doctor, I don't know. Whenever there is a medical issue, he is the one who comes to check it.

Our captors assume we're always listening. If we're quiet, they think it's because we're eavesdropping. We know that's what they think, because sometimes when we are quiet, they switch to whispers. Other times, knowing we're listening, they deliberately say things they shouldn't want us to hear, just to mess with us. But most of the time, they just talk. And we really do listen. That is how we study them. Not out of idle curiosity, but because we are trying to survive. And survival depends on getting to know them, on being able to strike up a seemingly friendly rapport, on understanding whom we can ask for what, whom we can squeeze for information about what's going on

outside. And information is such a precious commodity, especially when you're trapped in such suffocating darkness. When I manage to overhear them and catch how they answer the phone to each other, I get the sense that they all belong to the same *hamula*, the same clan, or at least all live in the same neighborhood. Their affectionate tone, their warmth, the familiar way they speak, even when the person on the line is a relative of someone else in the squad. It gives them away.

Information never flows freely. Even when they are calm and relatively talkative, our captors remain guarded. We sense it. They are careful not to divulge personal information. Where they really live. How old they really are. What their family is really like. Whatever they *do* tell us, we have to take with a pinch of salt. There are parts of their stories they keep revising. So even what I do know about them, I am never sure that I really know.

Nevertheless, there are things I pick up and learn. I notice, for example, the despair in their voices even in moments of ecstasy. I notice that they are lugging around years of brainwashing and ignorance. That they don't actually know much. About us, or about the world. That their beliefs can be borderline naive sometimes. For example, they talk about Hezbollah's shelling and missile fire at northern Israel, and they are convinced that soon, *just wait and see*, Israel will be forced to its knees. *Just you wait.* And I look at them in disbelief, wondering how on earth they actually believe all this.

Our captors all have mantras they repeat on a loop. Some more, some less. But there are some things they all believe and say with absolute confidence: Islam is the only true path, and the land belongs to them—*the whole* land, everything they call Palestine. Whether it's the area bordering Gaza or East Jerusalem, Acre or Tel Aviv or Beit She'an: there is no room for the Jews here and no such thing as Israel. They will not relent in their war against us until we all pack up and go back to the countries we came from, until they

conquer every last inch of this land. Sometimes we sense their hatred for us just for being Jewish. We hear them blurting, "Jewish pigs," with disgust and scorn. Some of them are more extreme, or perhaps only more honest, and say that their mission doesn't end there, between the river and the sea. They dream of establishing an Islamic empire that will conquer the whole world. In their minds, not only is there no such thing as Israel; there is no such thing as France or Britain or Sweden either. The whole world should be Muslim.

Like us, they too invent nicknames. That's one of the ways they humiliate us, laughing at our expense. At first, they call me "Ramadan," until they realize that Ramadan is actually a good thing and I don't deserve it, so they switch to "Abbas," after Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority president and head of the rival Fatah party. They utterly despise him. As a rule, they hate absolutely everyone who isn't one hundred percent with them. Everything is black and white for them. Anyone who isn't totally on their side is their enemy. That is how they talk about the Palestinian Authority and Egypt's President Sisi. Or gets given the moniker "Sa'id"; Elia, "Iyad"; and Alon, "Adel."

When I go to the bathroom, they can suddenly ask me, on purpose: *"Shu ismak?" What's your name?*

"Eli."

"No! You're Abbas!" And they roar with laughter.

For months, like us, they veer between days of despair and days of hope. When it feels like there is progress in the ceasefire talks, they are calmer and more hopeful. And when it feels like the talks are stuck and the war is escalating, they become more desperate and irritable. Especially in August, September, and October, something happens to them. After their initial joy at Hezbollah's actions and Iran's intervention, they start feeling ground down. They get increasingly exhausted. That doesn't stop them from continuing to

starve us, or humiliate us, or, you know, hold us hostage, shackled and suffering in a tunnel. But it does make their own difficulties more transparent.

10

October 2024, like September and August before it, is a very difficult month. Our hunger becomes more intense, our conditions deteriorate, our cell gets dirtier and smellier, and our captors refuse to let us clean it, even though it bothers them too. They are visibly wary of coming anywhere near us, touching us, or even passing by. They fear the stench sticking to them, afraid of catching whatever diseases we might have contracted. After several days of ecstasy and cheers of "*Allahu Akbar!*" when we realize that something bad is happening to Israel, come days when they are visibly downbeat and depressed. We assume their naive belief that Israel would be brought down, by Hezbollah or anyone else, has evaporated. Maybe the support they received has fizzled out. Either way, they become tired and impatient.

Like in the last tunnel, here too our captors have a TV. Sometimes we catch information by overhearing it; other times, we manage to squeeze it out of them or eavesdrop through the walls. In a tunnel, you can hear everything. In November we start hearing chatter about the upcoming American elections. To our surprise, our captors are hoping for a Trump victory. At first, we can't understand why. Personally, we're worried that Trump's return to the White House could lead to an escalation in the war. But soon enough, we understand their thinking. They are hungry for change. They are fed up with Biden and hope that Trump will somehow move the needle and force a deal.

Our captors are in suspense ahead of the US elections, and as a result, so are we. As the polls increasingly predict a Trump victory, they become happier. Meanwhile, they keep receiving news from aboveground: nightly fatality reports, updates on the fierce battles we realize are raging elsewhere in the Gaza Strip. Trump's victory makes them happy and hopeful, and they start counting down the days till his inauguration. The mood changes. We've seen it before, when rumors or chatter about negotiations reassured our captors and gave them hope, and the same happens now. We can feel the euphoria brewing. They believe that there is a chance that talks will end this whole sorry saga.

While our bellies remain empty and our bodies succumb to extreme weakness, the tunnel is filled with optimistic speculation. We piece together snippets of information and realize something is happening. There really is talk of a deal. Everything becomes much more explicit in January, when Trump becomes president. Our captors start speaking more openly. They speak of a delegation going to Cairo, and then Qatar, speaking with Hamas officials, haggling over prices. At a certain stage, we start hearing numbers: thirty-three hostages, forty-two days. We keep hearing the same numbers. Thirty-three. Forty-two. The mood is infectious. But we're cautious. By now, we're tired of our own analysis and speculation and try to be more sober and levelheaded. We try not to delude ourselves. I'm constantly thinking and telling the others: *This is Hamas!* In the end, it's Hamas we're dealing with. You never know what's true or not. Until we're in the hands of the IDF, nothing, I mean *nothing*, is certain.

But we still have hope. Lots of it. One day, we hear whistling, whooping, and joyful honking on the television. The correspondent is reporting from the field, not from inside a studio. That's unusual. It means something is happening. I turn to Alon, Or, and Elia, and say, "That sounds like how they

celebrate when their prisoners are released. I remember it from previous deals." We realize that it's probably all kicking off. There is a deal. It's happening.

Since there hasn't been any fighting in our area for months, we haven't had the usual signs of change, such as pauses in the bombings. The only clues we have about what's going on outside come from fragments of TV coverage and whatever slips through our captors' loose lips. That's all we've got.

Near the end of January, an unfamiliar figure enters our tunnel. From the way he talks, and especially from the way everyone treads around and listens to him, we gather that he is a very high-ranking Hamas officer. Even higher up than Peaky. His status as the tip earns him the moniker "Tippy." He sits with our captors in their quarters. We can't see him; we only hear him. He spends many long hours giving them instructions and explanations. He speaks too quietly for us to pick up what he says, but the tone of authority is unmistakable. After a few hours, he leaves. The next day, he shows up again, in the afternoon. Again he sits with them, and again we feel the tension around his visit. We assume he won't come near and that we're of no interest to him, but then suddenly, at midnight—he shows up in our cell.

The Triangle and the Circle, who enter with him, immediately tell us to stand facing the wall. Our fear index spikes. We think they're about to start another search or subject us to some new form of humiliation. Tippy stands in the doorway. He saunters over to us and looks at the shackles that have been biting into our legs for over a year. He orders them to be removed at once. The Triangle scrambles to bring his keys and starts opening the locks, one by one. When he opens mine, I sense his hands shaking. He fears Tippy. After the chains come off, we approach Tippy, who starts asking us how we are, what it's like here, and whether we are being treated well. The Triangle and the Circle stand there too. Of course we tell them that everything is hunky-

dory, that we are being taken care of and we want for nothing. He eyes us skeptically and tells us that there will be a deal soon. I am sure that if he's here and the shackles are off, a deal is not only soon; it's imminent. He looks around at our filthy cell and orders us to clean it. Before he leaves, he instructs our captors to make us something to eat. It's midnight. We sit up, famished, to eat warm pasta and pita with peanut butter. It's the first time in ages we've had a second meal in the space of twenty-four hours.

After Tippy leaves, we start to eat more. He must have left them clear instructions. We understand that it was important for him that we start eating —another sign that a deal is underway. Three days later, Tippy shows up again, this time accompanied by someone who seems to be his assistant. The aide—I call him "the Trumpet" in my head—is his interpreter. Tippy orders the other captors to leave and sits with us in our cell, alone, the Trumpet by his side.

After the captors leave, he asks the Trumpet to ask us in Hebrew how we really feel, how our captors have been treating us this whole time, how much we have been given to eat. He tells the Trumpet to emphasize that we should feel free to speak openly, that he sent our captors away so we could speak our minds.

Since I know Arabic, I realize the Trumpet does not translate everything he says. He only says, "The commander is asking how you are and wants you to tell him how your time here was." Of course, we keep up the charade and tell him that everything is OK, lying and saying that nobody has ever mistreated us and that we are being cared for. I think he clocks that we're lying. But he is satisfied.

The conversation opens up. He asks us about ourselves, wanting to get to know us better. We tell him who we are, our names, where we're from. He asks us a lot about October 7. Alon, Or, and Elia tell him about the Nova Festival, the rocket shelter, the gunfire, the dead bodies, their abduction. Or and Elia

tell him about their partners, who they don't know if they're still alive. I tell him about Be'eri, about being ripped away from Lianne and my girls, about the kibbutz as it went up in flames. At one point, he tells me, "I am sorry about October 7."

We look at one another, baffled. He's *sorry* about October 7? What now? He's sorry they *did* it? He *feels* sorry for us? It's too strange. I am sure he is just going through the motions of acknowledging the suffering we have endured. I have no doubt that he doesn't regret what they did to us, even for one moment.

Later, he tells us through the Trumpet that he has twice escaped the IDF's attempts to kill him. We tell him we empathize. We are already used to nodding in agreement and mumbling phrases like "war is a terrible thing …" Just to make him think we feel his pain. That we understand him.

Tippy has many more questions for us, besides a basic introduction and our October 7 stories. We already agreed among ourselves, long before meeting him, that if we are asked questions, we should give closed answers. There's no knowing what they're trying to work out, and there's no guessing what piece of information that we divulge might end up revealing something that makes them want to hold on to us longer, or to torture us for information they deem vital. It's always better to give closed answers. That's what we try to do with Tippy. We refuse to give answers that would only invite further questions.

He sits with us for a couple of hours. We remember to keep thanking him for removing our leg cuffs and for the extra food. It's not just about giving him the respect he expects; we really mean it. This really is an enormous relief. If it were up to our regular captors, they would keep us starving and shackled until the moment of our release.

On February 1, 2025, Tippy shows up again, this time bearing a laptop. He walks into our cell again with the Trumpet and opens it. He is also carrying a bag full of USB sticks. He sticks one into the laptop and calls me. I see photos on the screen. They must be other hostages. Tippy asks me to identify myself and anyone I recognize. "There are twenty-five alive and eight dead," he says. Just casually, as you do.

I look at their faces. It's an emotionally charged moment. There are young women I don't recognize, some very elderly people, a young woman with a little ginger toddler and a little ginger baby girl. I think it's a girl. I point at the baby immediately and ask Tippy: "What's that? Did you kidnap a baby?"

"No," he says. "The baby was born in captivity."

I stare at him. "You kidnapped a pregnant woman?"

I get no answer.

I look at the young woman's face, at the faces of the toddler and the baby. *What are they doing in captivity? Who kidnaps a pregnant woman? Who kidnaps an infant? What the hell?*

Among the many faces peeking at me from the computer screen, I notice Tal Shoham and Ohad Ben Ami, neighbors of mine from Kibbutz Be'eri. I don't know whether they're alive or dead. I also spot my own photo, a picture from another time and place, showing me plump, happy, and healthy. I can also see Or. I can't make out Elia until he points at one of the photos and tells me it's him. I look at him and look at his photo again. He is half the man he used to be.

After this identity parade, Tippy, through the Trumpet, tells us about the arrangements for our release. "You," he says, pointing at me, "and you," he says, pointing at Or, "will be released on February 8. And you," he says, pointing at Elia, "get out on March 1. And you," he adds, pointing at Alon,

"you're meant to get out on March 8, but that's in Phase 2 and it hasn't been signed yet."

I look at Alon. The color drains from his face. He is pale and starts shaking. After Tippy leaves, Alon collapses to the floor in hysteria. He can barely speak. All his fears, his nightmare of being abandoned here alone, are coming true. He is meant to be the last one out. His life depends on a deal that hasn't even been signed. There's a real chance he'll be stuck here long after we're gone. He can't calm down. I sit beside him, offer water, hold him. I search for words to give him strength and comfort. Scouring for anything that might help him breathe.

Meanwhile, Or and Elia struggle to hide their glee about the upcoming release. When Alon steps out to use the toilet, I turn on them, furious. "Can't you see what he's going through? He's so scared, he's about to faint." They get it. They apologize. I swallow my own excitement, not just for Alon's sake, but also because I can't bring myself to feel it yet. Not until I've crossed that fence and made it home. Anything could go wrong. The whole thing could fall apart. Push comes to shove, I have exactly zero faith in Hamas or anyone around us.

I worry for Alon. These are harrowing days for him. Days of tears and fear and so much darkness. For the rest of us, time begins to expand. When you have something to look forward to, every minute feels like an hour; every day feels like an eternity. I make a point of sitting beside Alon as much as I can. It hurts to look at him. I don't know how I would hold up in his place, what kind of despair I might spiral into. I manage to calm him a little, to give him a sliver of faith that things will be OK. That in the end, he'll get out of here too.

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February 4. Morning. Tippy brings us new tracksuits and shoes, and tells us to set them aside for now. In the evening, after we eat, he and the Triangle tell me and Or to put on the new clothes and pack our things. We're leaving this place.

Or and I are surprised. We know we're supposed to get out on Saturday —so why are they suddenly moving us now, on Tuesday? Where are they taking us? Filthy and unshaven, I can't imagine they'd let us out in this state. Maybe they're moving us to a proper house to get cleaned up? But why so early? We zip up our tracksuits and slide into our fresh shoes. It's the first time we've worn shoes since arriving in Gaza. We've been barefoot this entire time. When we go to the toilet, we share my slippers, completely tattered by now.

It's time to part. I say goodbye to Elia, then walk over to Alon. We stand face-to-face for a moment before embracing. I keep repeating the words I've been telling him throughout our time in captivity: "You're strong. You've got this. You're capable. You're getting out of here." Alon keeps sobbing, unable to speak. "I'll find your parents the moment I'm out," I promise. "I'll talk to them, tell them everything about you. I'll fight for you, Alon. I won't forget you. You're getting out of here. You're next. Don't lose faith." I say it over and over, and still he can't get a word out of his mouth. Just silently sobbing.

Eventually, the Triangle has to pry me away from him and shove me, along with Or, into the corridor. Or and I start walking through the tunnel. We are joined by Peaky and Smiley. We walk until we reach the ladder at the base of a shaft—it's not the same one we came down. But it's not time to go up yet. Smiley and Peaky order us to stand and wait. Despite the urgency earlier, we end up waiting under the shaft for nearly an hour. Eventually, they begin climbing up slowly, and we follow.

When we emerge through the trapdoor, I see we're in a house. It's dark, but it seems to be their headquarters. I know that there was a house where

Peaky and Trash ran things, and this must be it. Peaky, Smiley, and Trash—who's already there—take us outside and quickly shove us into a car.

Like every time we go outside, I'm scared. The streets aren't empty. There are people out, even though it's the middle of the night. With the ceasefire in effect, life is bustling. I'm afraid someone will spot us. I remember how we were nearly lynched here on October 7. I remember how the fevered, rage-filled mob wanted to tear me apart, and how the Hamas terrorists struggled to pull me out. The car windows are blacked out, and our captors order us to keep our hoods up and our heads down, completely hidden. We sit hunched in the back, and the car starts moving. Trash drives, and Smiley sits next to him.

I have so many questions. Where are we going? What's the plan? What's happening? What do they want? What's actually going to happen from now till Saturday? I close my eyes and focus only on my will to get through this—for this to end, for it to be over already. Just like in my earliest days of captivity, way back when, over 480 days ago, I'm focused on survival.

On surviving one more minute.

One more moment.

We're almost there.

We drive for an hour. All I see is the floor of the car, jolting up and down on Gaza's unpaved roads. The car turns right, then left, then right again, then left again. I get the feeling that despite the long drive, we haven't actually gone far from where we started. The number of turns makes me think that the roads are full of potholes, making it hard to navigate. Eventually, I feel the car merge onto a highway, and after a few minutes, it comes to a halt.

Smiley opens the door and air streams in. I can smell the sea. A few minutes later, he takes me out of the car, and Peaky grabs Or. We stand outside for a moment. Suddenly, I feel tiny droplets: little splashes of rain on our heads. I haven't felt the rain in so long. I inhale the moist air.

After a brief wait, Smiley and Peaky walk us through the dark until we hear another car and more people. They hand us over to this new terrorist cell and leave. I never see them again. They were with me for over a year, and there's no goodbye. Neither from me, nor from them. I don't care about them. Whatever I know about them, whatever conversations we had, however well we may have known each other—they are still Hamas terrorists. Their job was to keep me and the others locked inside this horrific ordeal. To keep depriving us of our liberty. Of our lives. And I don't give a shit about them.

We get put in another car. I notice there's no license plate, just before they tighten our blindfolds, force our heads down, and drive off without any further fuss. The car radio is on. I hear music, then the news, but I can't make out what they're saying. After the news, there are ads. I catch one for a baklava business.

After a short drive, the car stops. Our new captors pull us out. It's still raining slightly. They start marching us forward. I feel plastic bottles and bits of debris underfoot, like we're walking through a garbage dump. At one point, the ground begins to slope, and I realize we're going up and down. Since we're blindfolded, we move slowly. The slope we're descending narrows, until we feel the walls and the tunnel closing in around us. I don't understand. Another tunnel? Again? Where are they taking us?

Once we are firmly inside the tunnel, they remove our blindfolds so we can walk faster. I look around. We're in an underground corridor. It's immediately clear, this tunnel is especially run-down. The walls are bare. Not even concrete. No tiling. Just exposed earth. I see mice scurrying around. Rats. Cockroaches. Nothing separates us from the pitch-black soil. Every so often, we hit a junction or a corner, lined with sandbags. Eventually, we reach a kind of cavern. No floor, no walls, no electricity. One of the new terrorists—he must be their commander—points at the corner and says, "You'll sleep here

tonight." We look around. It's the filthiest place we've been. The only thing giving this space any form is the sandbag partition at the entrance, separating us from the others. "If you need the toilet," he tells us, "dig a pit in the corner and do it there."

Or and I stare at each other in disbelief, baffled. Why did we have to get here four days early? They bring us two foul-smelling mattresses and order us to sleep. We try to drift off in this horrific stench, to close our eyes and rest despite the creepy crawlies and vermin scuttling over and around us.

At night, I dream about my siblings. The dream arrives out of nowhere. I dream about Sharon, about Osnat, about Yossi, about Hila. I can't remember a single dream from any of my hundreds of nights here, certainly not one they appeared in. Maybe I never let myself sink so deeply into longing. Maybe I never let them enter my nights. And now, as I stand possibly on the brink of my release, suddenly they show up in a dream. Suddenly, I'm hugging them. Suddenly, they're there. My siblings!

I wake with a jolt, my heart pounding. Above me, packed, exposed earth. Beside me, Or, fast asleep. I lie on my side and try to return to that dream.

11

For twenty-four hours, Or and I are alone in this new tunnel with our new group of captors—a group that includes a commander who comes and goes and two guards. We relieve ourselves in a small cesspit we've dug in the corner. We still don't understand why we're here. Why we ended up here instead of somewhere we could clean up ahead of our release. *What's the point of all this?* we wonder. Maybe something went wrong on the way? Maybe there's no reason at all.

The last tunnel—with its toilets, blankets, pillows, floor tiles, and ceramic walls—now feels like a glamping experience by comparison. Our guards don't say much to us, but they don't go out of their way to humiliate or yell at us either. We receive, relatively speaking, plenty of food. Lots of pita. They make sure we eat well. They add halva, cheese, *ful* beans. We are grateful for the new tracksuits, because it's cold and damp in this tunnel, and we have no blankets.

The commander, the one who received us at the car on Tuesday evening, is surprised to discover we know we're meant to be released on Saturday. He tries to give the impression that nothing is certain. We don't know if he was taken aback because it really isn't certain, or because someone told us. We don't know if it's uncertain at all. What I do know is that we're doomed to be kept in the dark until the last minute.

Wednesday night.

"Eli, I hear someone talking Hebrew," says Or.

"Hebrew?"

"Yes, yes!"

"The commander went out before. I think he's come back with someone else, and they're talking Hebrew." My hearing, which was already weak, has deteriorated in recent months. I try to figure out what else Or is picking up. "I hear them interrogating someone," he says. "I heard the date December 24."

"December 24?" I ask him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Or whispers. "Why?"

"It's Ohad Ben Ami!" I beam.

"Who?"

"Ohad Ben Ami," I repeat. "Ohad's a buddy of mine from Kibbutz Be'eri. December 24. That's his birthday. It must be him!"

Or is surprised. "How do you remember that?" he asks.

I grin. I remember Ohad's birthday because it's Christmas Eve. Ohad and I worked on the kibbutz together for many years, and every year, when I was away in England with Lianne and the girls for Christmas, it was his birthday. Ohad never liked it that I was always gone at that time. It's the end of the year, and there are financial reports to file. "Family is family," I always used to say.

My strong hunch that it's Ohad is reinforced by the pictures Tippy showed me a few days ago. I saw Ohad's face among the hostages set for release, so it makes perfect sense that he's here too. We sit and wait for Ohad to arrive. I can't wait to see him already. Finally, at long last, we hear the commander and Ohad walking near, until they reach the pile of sandbags at the entrance and they walk around them. And then I see him. Ohad Ben Ami.

I get up to greet him. He comes over, we look at each other, and then we hug, standing for several minutes in a deep embrace. I can feel his relief; he can feel mine. He's alive. I'm alive. Suddenly, after these long and terrible

months, I'm seeing and touching someone I know, someone from the outside world, someone from Kibbutz Be'eri. I let go to take another look. He's so thin. He looks much older than I remembered. His face is covered in white stubble. From the way he looks at me, I realize I must look awful too. That I've aged several years myself.

The commander leaves us, and Ohad and I start talking. I want to hear how he is, what he's been through. He wants to hear how I am and what I've been through. I tell him everything and he tells me everything. He tells me that his wife, Raz, was also kidnapped. The terrorists snatched him from his living room, dragged him out, threw him in a car, and took him into Gaza. Raz hid in their safe room. They found her later and abducted her too. They reunited them afterward.

"We were together in the beginning," he tells me. "In some family's house, locked in a room with Gali Tarshansky. She was alone there, so they put her together with us."

"Gali Tarshansky? Gali from my little Yahel's class?" I ask, stunned.

"Yes," he says. "Thirteen-year-old Gali. Kidnapped alone into Gaza."

"What happened to her?"

"She was with her father and brother in their safe room at home on October 7. Eventually, the terrorists set their house on fire, and they decided to escape through the window. Gali and her father, Ilya, jumped out. She ran one way, he ran another, and her sixteen-year-old brother, Lior, stayed under the bed, too scared to leave. He lay there till he asphyxiated from the smoke. Ilya hid in a bush and was rescued. The terrorists found Gali in the playground. They put her on a motorbike, joined up with us, and she stayed with us until she and Raz were released in the first deal."

Ohad and Raz protected Gali and treated her like their own child. Ohad even taught her some math. That was how they lived, like an adopted family,

until the first hostage deal, in November 2023. Then, after Raz was separated from Ohad, a moment filled with pain and fear, and after Raz and Gali were released, Ohad too was taken down into the tunnels, like me. He was held there with five other hostages, all younger than him. He tells me about how they tried to cope together, how they had to manage a shared existence in such harsh conditions. It's all so familiar. I can see the parallels between us, between how we both approach situations. We don't let things just happen; we manage them. That's something that was drilled into both of us from life working on the kibbutz. Always manage the situation. Leave no loose ends. Leave nothing in doubt. Let everyone speak their mind; don't let them keep it bottled up.

Ohad struck up a friendship with Elkana Bohbot, one of the younger hostages. They became the unofficial spokespeople for the six hostages in their tunnel. Unlike in our case, their captors kept more of a distance—their captors' quarters were nearly a thousand feet away from the hostages' cell. That came with advantages and disadvantages. The biggest downside was that they had to walk far for anything: to get food, to ask for something, to speak with the captors. The biggest upside was that they suffered less abuse and had their own space, with a little more privacy to speak relatively freely, since their captors weren't breathing down their necks.

As the group's representatives, Ohad and Elkana were the only ones allowed to go and collect food, making that two-thousand-foot round trip every day to pick up their meals and return their dishes. Their captors would sometimes invite them, as the hostages' representatives, to have coffee or watch the news with them. Ohad ended up having several deep conversations with the guards and their commander.

From what Ohad tells me, the guards used to beat the younger hostages viciously, and often. It was practically systematic. Then, at a certain point, Ohad went to speak with their commander and asked him to put a stop to the

violence. "You're creating fear," he told him. "I'm scared to approach you too. I never know when you might flip out at me. Please stop." He must have struck a nerve, because the commander promised that the violence would end —and it did.

Some things sound familiar to me and Or, but there are differences too. Unlike us, they had to build their own underground living quarters, to adapt the space for habitation themselves. As for toilets, they had a cesspit and a drainage system. Everything was much more organized where we were, since we were with the logistics team. On the other hand, they ate more than we did, and they never had just one meal a day. Still, like us, they always tried to hoard food, and they too quickly realized that they had to learn to manage their rations better. In the end, even though it seems they ate more, I can see that Ohad lost weight too. He looks like he's dropped several dozen pounds over the past year.

Besides what he endured in captivity, I try to understand whether Ohad knows what happened to the rest of our kibbutz on October 7. I gather that he and Raz were abducted two hours before me, but since he surprises me with the revelation that he was watching TV news the whole time, I wonder if he knows anything I don't. He doesn't share much. I get the sense that maybe it's too painful, or maybe he's being guarded. Eventually, I stop asking. Maybe I don't want to know everything.

Still, Ohad shares with me and Or some general developments we haven't heard: the elimination of Hamas military chief Mohammed Deif, and of Yahya Sinwar, and Nasrallah in Lebanon, and Haniyeh in Tehran. He tells us about the pager attack against Hezbollah and the ground operation in Lebanon, about Israel's accomplishments and the price we've paid. Every little morsel of news thrills us.

"Did you hear about the six who were murdered?" he asks us.

We look at him apprehensively. "What six?"

"Carmel Gat," he tells me. "From Be'eri."

"Yeah sure, what about her? Murdered?"

"Kidnapped and murdered in September, along with five other hostages."

"Who else?" we ask.

"Don't know if you know them."

"Who?" I press him.

"She was murdered alongside Eden Yerushalmi, Alex Lobanov, Ori Danino, Almog Sarusi, and Hersh Goldberg-Polin."

Or and I stare at each other. For a moment, we can't breathe. It's been over a year since we saw Ori, Almog, and Hersh. Over a year in which we were sure they were long home. We even envied them for getting out. We hoped they were sending regards to our families. We've spent a year thinking about how special they were, how wise, how much energy they had, what light they shone.

Murdered. In a tunnel.

In a quiet, mournful tone, I tell Ohad about our encounter with them. About the days we spent together. About "he who has a *why* can bear any *how*."

Or, who understands that Ohad and I go way back, asks about how we know each other. "We used to work together," I tell him. "Ohad was for many years the kibbutz's finance manager and I was the treasurer. For a few years, I was a part-time manager of the kibbutz's farm, so for part of the week, I was his boss, and for the rest of the week, he was mine." Ohad and I chuckle. Then we go down memory lane and share the memories that come to mind with Or. Good times. Challenging times. Funny times. Complicated times.

The night Ohad arrives, the Hamas commander calls me and takes me aside. He pulls out his phone and shows me a picture. It's my brother Yossi.

My brother Yossi, who lives in Be'eri with his family. My brother Yossi, about whom I have no idea what happened—to him or to his family—on October 7.

"Do you know who this is?" the commander asks me.

"Of course! That's my brother, Yossi."

The commander puts the phone back in his pocket and looks at me. "Be strong tomorrow. Steel yourself. I need to tell you something about him." He sends me back to our room, to Or and Ohad. I keep my lips sealed. Deep inside, I start to realize that Yossi was also taken hostage. Maybe something happened to him.

The following day, the Hamas commander calls me over again. He tells me that Yossi was abducted from his home on the morning of October 7 and that he was killed, because the house where he was being held in Gaza was bombed by the IDF. I nod, he walks away, and I go back to Or and Ohad.

"What did he say?" Ohad asks.

I tell him what the commander said. Ohad says nothing. "I'm not fazed," I tell them. "You never know what to believe. He didn't show me any proof. He just said it. How does he even know who my brother is?"

Ohad still says nothing.

"Just like they didn't tell us about Sinwar," I say, "or Nasrallah or the pagers or anything else that's happening. So we can't believe what they *do* tell us. There's no knowing what's true, so it doesn't really matter, I don't think."

Ohad places his hand on my shoulder.

"You can never know," I mumble.

"Eli," says Ohad.

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

"Not sure you've got anything to be sorry for," I tell him.

"Eli, it's true. I know for sure that Yossi was killed. I'm sorry." I look at Ohad. "There was an official statement from the IDF spokesman," he whispers. "I saw it on TV."

When I was sixteen, I left Tel Aviv and moved to Be'eri alone. Despite my age, I decided I wanted to join the kibbutz—its community life, its wide-open fields, its pioneering spirit. I signed up as an outsider, and over time I blended into my age group as an equal. I finished school, enlisted in the army, and knew that I wanted to build my home and my life in Be'eri. I met Lianne, we got married, we had Noiya and Yahel, and despite the difficult years of sirens and rocket fire from Gaza, I knew—we knew—that the girls were growing in paradise, with everything they could possibly need and beyond.

My brother Yossi, older than me by a year, followed my lead and joined the kibbutz later on. Before 9/11, he worked for a moving company in the United States and business was booming. But a change in US policy after the attacks forced him to return to Israel, and I suggested he give kibbutz life a try. Yossi arrived at Kibbutz Be'eri and immediately felt at home. At first, he joined as an employee, but unsurprisingly, the folk at the printing press—the kibbutz's main business—fell in love with him. Thanks to his skills, empathy, and professionalism, he fit right in.

That was around the time he met Nira, who also wasn't from the kibbutz. The kibbutz admitted them both as members, and they got married and had three daughters. Both of us raised our daughters on the kibbutz. We practically lived next door to each other. We liked being so close. It was good for our girls. We did family trips together, shared family meals. Our daughters were as close as sisters. The future felt wide open, beautiful—and far away.

I'm struggling. My legs feel wobbly, my body feels weak, and I sit down, almost crashing onto the filthy mattress. Ohad sits beside me. Or sits across. I close my eyes. "What about Nira and the girls?" Ohad says he doesn't know.

He thinks they were unharmed. But he doesn't talk much about what happened in Be'eri. He does tell me about Noa Argamani and Itay Svirsky, whom he met for a few hours in a tunnel somewhere. About the video of Noa he saw on TV, in which she said that Itay and Yossi, held with her in the same house, were killed in captivity.

Itay was born on Kibbutz Be'eri. I didn't know that he was also kidnapped, that he was murdered in captivity, or that his parents, Rafi and Orit, were murdered on October 7. I learn all this from Ohad. Rafi Svirsky worked with me and Ohad in the kibbutz's financial office. We've known Itay since he was a little boy. When Ohad met Itay in the tunnel, Itay told him that he reckoned his parents were murdered. Ohad tells me about the operation to rescue Noa and three other hostages. This derring-do seems a bit over the top. I had no idea any of this happened.

Ohad also learned something else that he shares with us: the ceremonies. The parades that Hamas organizes every time it releases hostages. He tells us about the young female soldiers—we didn't even know they had been kidnapped—and about the release of Arbel Yehoud and Gadi Mozes from Nir Oz. "Brace yourselves," he tells us. "We're also going to get released in a whole spectacle, with a stage and a crowd, so just be aware, that's what it'll look like."

The next morning, we understand why we are being held in this tunnel. We're here for the movies. For another Hamas campaign. They start filming us from the early hours of the morning in all sorts of positions, directing scene after scene. Then another one. Now walk. Now sit. Pretend you're getting the news you're being released. Now get up. Walk through this door. Now stand in the corridor. Now crouch. Like that, over and over again, on a loop.

On Thursday night, they even take us out of the tunnel and move us to a nearby house. A magnificent building, with fine furniture. There, in the house, they film us one by one. We each need to speak into the camera, to explain

who we are and where we're from, and to answer the questions from one of the guards. The questions are very specific. They show them to us in advance and check that we give them the answers they want to hear. The terrorist asks each of us, for example, what we want to tell Netanyahu, or how we think the war should end, and so on. We already know exactly how to answer to put their minds at ease.

We wait to sit down. We are so tired from it all. The "movie shoot" has exhausted us, pushed us to our limits. The conditions in the tunnel, Hamas's own little soundstage, are also harsh. Everything's dark, damp, and dirty. Full of rats and roaches. The cesspit reeks and so do we. It dawns on us: This is how we're getting out of here. With this stench clinging to our skin. With this skin clinging to our bones. Our faces unshaven. But who cares. We just want it to be over.

12

Friday night. Our captors try to keep us in the dark the whole time.

Tomorrow is meant to be Freedom Day, but they keep repeating that it's only a maybe, and *inshallah*, and who knows, and anything might change. Their skepticism helps me. It keeps me restrained. I keep all my emotions bottled up. The anticipation is immense, the tension intense. My heart is pounding, and my broken, bent body is desperate to get out already—but we know who we're dealing with. I take a deep breath and tell myself, and Ohad and Or, that our captors aren't nice Norwegians. They are Hamas. We know them well by now. Anything can go wrong, at any second, and from now until the moment we are finally out, there is still an eternity of seconds to go. As far as I'm concerned, until the Red Cross hands us over to the IDF, this isn't really happening.

On our last night, we can't fall asleep. I keep thinking about what Ohad said, about the parades they are planning for us, about the audience, the crowds. It's scary, and I just want to put this behind me. I remember that I had always imagined a simpler release. I had imagined just getting put in a car, moved to a Red Cross vehicle, handed over to the IDF, and that's it. I never dreamed that this whole ordeal would involve so much eye-popping, stomach-churning PR.

Saturday morning arrives. Our captors wake us up in the dark tunnel at 05:00 to start getting ready. We take our plastic bags, and together with our captors begin the long ascent to the top. There are sections of this tunnel with very low ceilings, so low that you practically have to crawl. We get covered in mud. We keep walking and crawling through furrows of bare, cold, filthy earth, inching up toward ground level. It's a long ascent: the tunnel is extremely deep. When we finally reach the exit, we get given new, clean clothes for the release itself. Ugly brown suits, the perfect complement to our anyway-disheveled look.

We sit at the tunnel mouth, not yet venturing out. The pale light of dawn breaks outside, and an IDF drone buzzes through the air without pause, right above our heads. The terrorists are afraid to step out, scared that the second they emerge with us, the IDF will bomb them. They are genuinely terrified. I think to myself, *It's insane to imagine the IDF bombing right now, during the handover. There's no way they would jeopardize this now.* But the buzzing of the drone makes an awful din. It reminds me of my early days in captivity, when I was still aboveground, held in a house in Gaza, and I'd hear that constant noise. It scared me then. It scares me now. It's the sound that heralds falling bombs.

We sit and wait. A minute passes. Another. Half an hour. Another half hour. The buzzing still saws through the dawn air. The terrorists tell us, "See? Bibi wants to kill you. See? Even on the day you're meant to go home, he wants to bomb you. He doesn't care about you."

After an hour and a half, the drone moves on and we exit the tunnel.

The tunnel exit is hidden in a deserted, run-down neighborhood. We make our way through garbage dumps and junkyards until we reach a vehicle. The terrorists are still on edge, wary about a possible air strike. The car windows are blacked out. Our eyes are blindfolded, our heads pinned down.

The terrorists are not only afraid of the IDF, but also of the frenzied mob that would attack the car if it realized who's inside.

We drive off. After fifteen minutes, we stop. We hear the commander getting out, scuttling away, and coming back a few minutes later. He brings us new black shoes, which he bought just now. These are no regular lace-up shoes; they're slip-ons. These are the shoes we will wear on our way out. We remove the shoes we're wearing and slip these ones on. I don't know why. Maybe they think they're a better match for our hideous brown tracksuits. We drive away.

The car stops. The terrorists remove us from the vehicle and remove our blindfolds. We are surrounded by dunes of sand and rubble. The commander points east and says, "That's Nahal Oz!" I try to make out what he's pointing to in the distance. After a few minutes of standing around, the dress rehearsal begins. Hamas operatives give us stage directions for every moment of the ceremony: how to get out of the car, walk up to the stage, and go up the stairs, what to say, what *they'll* say, how to wave as instructed, when to smile. Everything. It's a meticulously stage-managed spectacle.

The team handling our release includes one Hamas member who speaks Hebrew. He's in charge of our media messaging and interviews. He sits down with us to coach us for the questions he'll ask onstage. The questions are similar to those we were asked on Thursday night, for the "movie shoot." "Say this like that," he corrects us. "And that like this. Emphasize this here. Add that there." He drills us again and again until he's satisfied with our answers and happy that they meet the needs of the production.

We each have to answer four or five questions. He asks me about Netanyahu again and directs me to say that he would rather kill babies in Gaza than release the hostages, or something like that. It doesn't matter. None of

this really matters. I have only one goal: to do whatever it takes, and give them whatever they want, to ensure a smooth release. To survive. To get home.

They keep warning us: if we go off script—if we stray from the preapproved answers—they'll drag us back into the tunnels, and the release will be aborted. He also asks me about Yossi and tells me to say that I wish Yossi were here, but the Israeli Air Force killed him. Finally, he asks how I feel about being reunited with my family. I say I'm really excited to see my wife and daughters.

We get back into the car, drive a little farther, and arrive at the stage. The real one. The show is about to begin. Huge crowds of Gazans have gathered there: men, women, children. Packed together, buzzing with excitement, roaring at the foot of the stage. Some have even climbed up power poles—I see them sixty, maybe one hundred feet high—jockeying for the best view of this thrilling attraction: three Jewish civilians, held in Hamas captivity, now walking free.

I know, because Ohad prepared me, that there's going to be a mass audience. But even so, I'm staggered by the numbers. I'm still stunned by the frenzy, the ecstasy in the air, everyone's hunger to see us and to get close to us. The suspense is palpable. The Hamas terrorists tell us not to be afraid, they'll protect us. Before we get out of the car, they form a human square, a buffer between us and the frenzied crowd. In these moments, like every time we emerged from the tunnels into the street, like every second we spent outside, Hamas are the "good guys." They're our rock. There to make us feel safe, to shield us. We know that without them, every single person in that crowd would lynch us right there and then. It's something we're used to. The people responsible for us being here—scrawny, famished hostages, separated from their families for hundreds of days, in agony and pain—are also responsible for our welfare and go through the motions of pretending they care about us.

They're two-faced, and both faces are savage.

I spot the cameras all around, the Al Jazeera reporters, a blonde Red Cross woman with a bob onstage. The terrorists lead us out of the vehicle one by one and escort us onto the stage. All around us, whistles of joy and ecstasy.

Onstage, I do exactly as instructed. I don't put a foot in the wrong place. I follow the script we rehearsed so many times. I'm careful not to slip up, not to ruin anything, not to sabotage the moment, just to make sure this release actually happens. I give the "right" answers, I smile, I wave at the audience. The terrorist interviewing me works the crowd, chanting "*Allahu Akbar!*" and they holler back in a call-and-response. The ceremony comes to a close. Ohad gets off the stage first, followed by me, then Or. We get into a Red Cross vehicle and sit down. The car starts moving. The crowds are banging on the windows.

The woman from the Red Cross turns to us. "Hi, I'm Felicity. I'm from New Zealand," she says and points at the driver. "He's from South Africa. I want you to know you're safe now. This vehicle is armored. The windows are bulletproof. No one can get in. You are protected. Nothing will happen to you."

And the moment she says that, I break down crying.

After 491 days of captivity and suffering and darkness and pain, I break down like never before. I sob and sob and sob. She said we're *protected*. She said we're *safe now*. I focus on the calm in her voice. I cling to the kindness in her eyes. We drive toward the handover point—*my* handover. *You're safe now*, she said. When was I last safe? When was I last *secure*? When could I even let myself break down like this? I look out the window, tears streaming down my face.

Ohad, sitting next to me, also looks at the Red Cross staffers, unmoved by Felicity's gentle eyes. The car stumbles over Gaza's potholed roads. Every

now and then, Gazans start banging on the windows.

Ohad turns to Felicity, his voice cracking. "Where were you?" She says nothing. Neither does the driver. "For a year and four months, we didn't see you. We didn't hear from you. You didn't take care of us. You never visited. Where were you?"

Felicity looks at Ohad. Then she turns back, to face the road ahead. "They didn't let us reach you," she says softly.

Another Red Cross vehicle drives ahead of us. Another behind. We're a convoy of three, heading to the rendezvous with the IDF. Felicity gets a call from an IDF officer who wants to speak to me, to confirm it's really us in the car.

"Hi, it's Eli Sharabi," I tell him. "I can confirm, I'm with Ohad Ben Ami and Or Levy. We're here. We're healthy and whole. We're on our way to you."

We approach the IDF handover point. After almost five hundred days, I'm finally seeing IDF soldiers, their olive-green uniforms, the blue-and-white flag of Israel! I already broke down in the Red Cross car, so by the time we reach the handover, I've pulled myself together again. We step out, and a female officer approaches me—maybe a social worker or psychologist, I'm not sure. But I recognize her. I met her and her husband at some event, two years earlier.

"I know you. I remember you," I say.

She smiles, not letting on that we know each other. "You're in safe hands now," she says. "Your mother and Osnat are waiting for you at the meeting place in Camp Reim."

I look at her. "Bring me my wife and daughters."

Silence. "Your mother and Osnat will tell you."

Your mother and Osnat will tell you.

No one needs to tell me anything.

It's all clear in that moment, right there, standing in front of her. I understand everything. I understand it in my bones. I understand it from head to toe. I understand it, and I feel the pain pulsating through my broken body, a pain without a name and without form, and nobody needs to say another word.

My mother and Osnat are here.

My Lianne, my Noiya, and my Yahel—they are not.

I understand everything.

I don't cry. I don't fall apart.

I think only of my mother and my sister, who are waiting for me. I want to see them already. I want to hug someone from my family after hundreds of days of separation. I want to hold someone I know. I want these moments to come. That's the only thing on my mind.

Why didn't I break down completely, there and then? Why didn't I sob my heart out when I understood that Lianne was gone, Noiya was gone, Yahel was gone—and I have been left here, all alone? I think it's because throughout those 491 days of captivity, I had played out every possible scenario in my mind. Including the worst. I hoped it wasn't true. But something inside me had helped me brace myself, just in case it was. I'm a logical kind of guy. I think with my head. And as a matter of statistics, I took this possibility into account. *I guess it could be* … But at the same time, I knew that I had to shove this thought to the corner of my mind. To survive, I would have to cling to the belief and the possibility that they were still alive. But part of me had already processed the grief, assuming this was their fate.

So I keep moving. My face, my heart, my soul are now heading toward the IDF base at Reim. That's where my mother is. That's where my big sister Osnat is. I'm engulfed by the tragedy that has just struck me, but I stay focused on them. On my mother. On Osnat.

I'm free.
I'm a free man now.
They are waiting for me.
I'm coming.

13

We get in a big van and drive from the rendezvous with the IDF, on the Gaza Strip border, to Camp Reim. I enter with the social worker I just spoke to. Or and Ohad also jump in, accompanied by IDF officers. I see there's a female officer talking to Or; I can't make out what she's saying, but he bursts into floods of tears, and I understand, right there and then, that she's told him his wife, Einav, is dead. I start thinking about every time I tried to instill him with hope she was still alive. But she's gone. I look out the window. I recognize the fields, brilliant green at this time of year, the road that loops around the Gaza border. This is my home vista. This is where I have lived for the last thirty-six years.

We approach Camp Reim. It's all so familiar. I have driven past here so many times before. Outside are crowds of people with Israeli flags at the bus stop. When we drive near them, I recognize some familiar faces. Friends from Be'eri, from neighboring kibbutzim. I glue my face to the window, excited. When we get out, inside the base, we are welcomed by a row of officers, who direct us to a compound that looks like an events hall. A clean, pretty, tidy space that seems to have been set up especially for hostages returning from captivity.

I am accompanied the whole time by an IDF officer, together with the social worker. They take me to a room set aside for me, with a bed and a

shower. Folded on the mattress are fresh clothes, my size: some pants and a few shirts, so I can pick what I want to wear. They offer me a shower to freshen up before I meet my family. The social worker leaves and the officer stays behind in the room, standing against the wall. I assume he's here to make sure I won't harm myself. *I won't harm myself*, I want to tell him. *You have no idea how badly it hurts, but also how badly I want to live.* I stare at the sink, the faucets, the white ceramic counter, the soap, the shampoo. So many things I haven't seen in such a long time.

I step up to the mirror.

For the first time, after so long, I see myself in the mirror. I inspect myself, looking at my sunken eyes, my hollow face, my body—*I'm so skinny!*—my head, which looks like a skull with a patch of skin. I strip, open the faucet, and stand under the hot water. *How amazing, hot water! A shower!* I lather myself with soap again and again and again, trying to wash the filth off me. To wash Gaza off me.

After showering, I shave, get dressed, and step out.

The officer looks at me. "Ready?" he asks.

"Ready."

"We want you to eat something before you meet your family," he says. I nod. There's a small plate of vegetables. I nibble some. Then we step out of the room, walk a little down the hallway, and enter another room. And there, sobbing, my mom and my sister Osnat run toward me. I open my arms wide. They open theirs. We hug each other. They cry. I squeeze both of them tightly.

"What happened to them?" I ask them as we hug.

"They were murdered," my sister whispers.

"And where are they buried?"

"In Kfar HaRif," she sobs.

I hug her even closer. "Great choice, Osnat. Thank you."

I feel a sense of relief when I hear that they are not buried in the Kibbutz Be'eri cemetery. If I don't have Lianne and the girls, and I don't have Yossi, there's no reason for me to go back. I don't want them to be buried there. I want them nearby. Osnat lives in Kfar HaRif, and my daughters, who were so attached to her, spent so much time there. So it's good that they're near her.

Then we sit down, the three of us, and talk. Trying to catch up on so much in one go. They caress me, ask me questions softly, update me in gentle whispers. I open up a little but mostly stay silent. I tell them that I already know about Yossi. I realize they've been grieving him and Lianne and the girls for nearly a year, and I'm the one who has to digest all the news right now. This whole time, everyone around me keeps pushing me more food. *Eat something, drink something*. Checking I haven't collapsed. After half an hour of this, I say I want to leave. They introduce me to the helicopter crew: the pilot, the navigator. Everyone is anxious to talk me through everything. After so long in captivity, where nothing was in my hands, they want to make me feel in control, to feed me information. I reassure them, tell them I'm OK and we can go already.

The helicopter takes off. Something about that feeling of taking off, soaring high, seems to symbolize my sudden freedom. Through the window, I see the beautiful, green, wounded, beloved land of Israel stretching below me. Cities. Villages. Roads. Forests. Stretches of wilderness and blooming fields.

Aboard the helicopter, we each sit with our own families. Or sits with his brother; Ohad with Raz; me, with Osnat and my mom. We are also joined by IDF officers responsible for our welfare, therapists, and some other officers I don't recognize. While we're up in the air, one of the officers comes up to me and asks me, "Would you like to walk out of the helicopter wrapped in an Israeli flag?" I look at him. "You don't have to," he says.

"Would I ever!" I reply. Even before we land, I recognize the people waiting near the helipad, carrying flags and waving. When the helicopter touches down, I wrap myself in an Israeli flag, and that—enveloped in blue and white—is how I walk out, into the walkway that leads us to another van. The van starts driving toward the inpatient tower at Sheba Hospital, outside Tel Aviv. In the van, I manage to convince the driver to slow down a second next to the excited crowd waiting to welcome us. He slows down and I wave through the window. I spot familiar faces. Distant relatives. Friends. I keep waving and waving and waving. Wrapped in the flag. Holding it tight to my flesh.

From the van, we enter the hospital building, to be escorted by the friendly medical teams. As all this goes on, I'm stunned by the number of people involved in the whole release process. I'm astonished by the level of planning, their sensitivity, the attention to detail. How everyone knows their exact role and how everyone around me, and in more distant circles, wants to help me and make things better. I go up the elevator, exit, walk into another room, and that's where I meet my brother Sharon and sister Hila. We sink into one large, tear-drenched embrace. Sharon is wrapped in a tallit; I'm still wrapped in my flag, and we all stand there in each other's arms.

All of us. Besides Yossi. All of us. Except for those who are no more.

When night descends on Tel-HaShomer, I ask to make two calls. The first is to Lianne's parents. The second, to Alon's. When they answer, I ask them to put me on speakerphone, so that his sister, brother, grandma, and grandpa can listen too. And I talk. I tell them about their son, their brother, their grandson. I tell them that he's not the boy they remember. He's tougher. More mature. Wiser. I tell them about his journey. His inner strength. The gentle, sensitive core wrapped in rough edges. I tell them he's strong. I tell them I'm convinced he'll survive. That he's their son, but now he's also mine

in a way. I tell them that I'm still looking out for him, that I'm praying for his well-being and release.

I hear their excitement over the phone, their surprise upon discovering how much I know about them—their birthdays, their hobbies, their pastimes. I've racked up thousands of "Alon miles." I think they don't understand how well I know him and how much I care. We arrange to meet soon.

I hang up and look up at the star-filled sky outside.

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We drive to Kfar HaRif. Me and the two psychologists who have been with me since my release. We are joined by my sister Osnat, our family's army liaison Officer Sigal, and a nurse. Before we set out, the psychologists prepare me. We think together about what it will look like and what will happen there. They are managing the whole event, and I trust them. We all sit in silence in the car. The scenery races past the windows. *I need closure*, I think to myself. *I need to see it with my own eyes.* I need to tell them I'm back. I promised them I'd come home, and here I am.

We reach the cemetery. Everyone gets out of the car.

I walk toward the graves by myself, with Osnat by my side. The medical and welfare teams stay behind. We walk closer, Osnat slowly leading me, until eventually she points and says, "Here they are, Eli."

I look at the three graves.

Lianne.

Noiya.

Yahel.

The peaceful fields around us glisten, a taut blue sky overhead. Birds chirp. I break down crying. I don't even try to stop myself. Osnat hugs me. I fall to my knees. I can't see anything. Everything's blurry. The sky. The view. The other headstones. The people who came with me. Everything fades away.

Only Yahel, Noiya, and Lianne exist.

Forty minutes later, I tell Osnat, "OK, let's go."

She looks at me, puzzled. "It's OK," I tell her. "Let's go."

I signal to everyone: *It's over,* finis. I pick myself up and start walking slowly toward the exit of the cemetery.

This here is rock bottom.

I've seen it. I've touched it.

Now, life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Normally, this section in a book is dedicated to the handful of people who helped the author prepare the manuscript. That is not the case here. The book before you is not a work of fiction or investigative journalism; rather, it seeks to summarize a segment of my life that spans from the day I was abducted on October 7, 2023, until my return to Israel from Hamas captivity.

It is a privilege to speak to you through this book.

I am grateful, first and foremost, to my family for halting their lives and working tirelessly for my release, and for their embrace and support from the moment of my return: to my mother Hanna, to my older sister Osnat, to my brother Sharon, and my younger sister Hila. To my brothers-in-law Raz Matlon and Chen Tal, to my sisters-in-law Nira and Hadas Sharabi, and to my nieces and nephews who appeared on every possible stage calling for my release.

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friend and advisor since my release.

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We would not have come back from the October 7 tragedy without the mobilization of the entire Jewish people, in Israel and in the Diaspora, in a call that echoed around the world for the return of the hostages. While we were held captive, we didn't know—nor could we imagine—the scope and power of that clear and vital message that shook the soul of the world. Thank you all.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELI SHARABI is a former hostage who survived 491 days in Hamas captivity following his abduction from Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7, 2023. Sharabi has since become a global advocate for the remaining hostages, meeting with world leaders like US president Donald Trump, speaking at the United Nations, and sharing his story with audiences around the world. His memoir, *Hostage*, the first published account by a released Israeli hostage, became an instant number one bestseller in Hebrew and the fastest-selling book in Israeli history. Born in Tel Aviv to Yemenite and Moroccan parents, Sharabi moved to Be'eri as a teenager and later married Lianne, with whom he shared two daughters, Noiya and Yahel, aged sixteen and thirteen. A longtime resident of Be'eri, Sharabi served as the kibbutz's chief financial officer and business manager. He was also the CFO of Be'eri Printing and other private companies in Israel. Sharabi continues to work tirelessly as a leader in the campaign for the release of captives.

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